KNIGHTBEAT

KNIGHTBEAT VI

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Pet Peeves

by R. A. Johnston

It was all Nicholas's fault, of course. It usually was. They had been at the Raven gloomily toasting the closure of a Toronto institution and trying not to sink into depression at the thought of Janette leaving them to pursue a stage career in Los Angeles. Neither noticed (for once) the throng of enthralled women eyeing them from the dance floor. They sat in an atmosphere of rare congeniality, when Nicholas had put the bug in his ear.

"You know, LaCroix, you really should get a dog."

"A dog?"

"Yeah, you know, something loyal and obedient to worship at your feet. After all, I won't be around *all* the time."

"A dog," LaCroix repeated, testing the word in his mouth, savoring an unfamiliar concept. "But you know that most animals shun us, Nicholas!"

"Do you think mortals are any better? Take the changes to your radio show, for example. Why settle for intelligent scripts and complex, interesting stories? Instead, throw in lots of glitz and sex. Presto! Entertainment for the masses!"

With that, both vampires were silent for a moment. Even Nicholas was suffering under new management, with a new partner, a new captain and that new young vampire at the Raven who was putting the moves on Janette. Not that Nick begrudged Janette any happiness (OK, maybe just a little), but what was he supposed to when she was gone if he needed clues, contacts, words of wisdom or a little necking? Even Natalie was making noises about Nick committing to their relationship, instead of stringing her along. Geez, what did they expect, emotional maturity?

"Nicholas, I..."

"It's only a blink of time for you, but wouldn't it be worth it, to have something that can love you unconditionally, even if it's just for a little while?"

Ouch. That hurt.

Nicholas was getting better at doling out little zingers of his own.

And to think that **I** *used to have all the great lines.*

"Think of how much fun you'd have with a dog!" Nick added coaxingly,

Fun. OK, LaCroix supposed that in a certain demented way, owning a dog while on the permanent night shift could be vaguely amusing. It was also a logistical nightmare to contemplate. Dogs required walks, and food, and sunlight. Dogs made messes on wood-inlaid floors and oriental carpets. Dogs chewed antique furniture, designer shoes and clothes. Dogs knocked over priceless objet d'art with callous disregard for cost. But, then again, they were awfully cute and fuzzy.

"I'll think about it, Nicholas," and with that LaCroix went back to his dark and brooding Heathcliff mode, which put several women at the bar into hormonal overdrive, even at twenty feet away. Mortal women always went crazy for that arched eyebrow and that impeccable British accent, which by all rights was an incongruity in an Italian-born Frenchman. Still, it served its purpose. He'd gotten to know a lot of necks that way.

The show had closed ahead of schedule, and LaCroix was restless. Change was in the air, what with the new company taking over the radio station, and rumor had it that some heads would roll. Some fresh blood was to be added to spice up the ratings. Not that LaCroix had anything against fresh blood, you understand, but he had met two of the new recruits, and was totally underwhelmed. Through the glass of the broadcast booth he could see the newest addition to the CERK radio station, a young woman in her mid-twenties with seemingly endless cleavage and teeth. LaCroix had met her earlier this evening, and he was forced to conclude that she possessed three major attributes: the body of a goddess, the morals of a mink in heat, and the intelligence of a small soap dish. Listening to the insipid giggle she released with every other phrase, he felt the urge to rid humanity of its burden, then abruptly changed his mind. Whatever she had might be catching. *Where* did they get these people?

Oh yes, and the young male DJ hired for the billboard advertising campaign. Nice hair, great body, a Tom Cruise look-alike. He was supposed to bring in the younger female audience as the quintessential young stud because the over-thirty crowd that truly appreciated the

Night Crawler was only a small minority. That just went to show that if you had class and taste, you wouldn't get very far in this world. Perhaps it would be best to retire from this job and move on, before the new station management mangled CERK beyond all recognition. It wasn't as if he didn't have other job offers. The conventions were going well, and they had offered him the lead role in *Phantom* just last week. A classy role for a classy guy, they said. All that musical training shouldn't go to waste, but deep inside he still yearned to do *Rocky Horror....*

It was a beautiful night in the neighborhood. Lucien LaCroix was walking the streets of Toronto. The few hours between the end of his radio show and sunrise were a private time, often spent strolling through the city while it slept. Inevitably, his route would take him past the shop he always stopped at. The light was on in the store window, and nestled in the torn newspaper, the objects of his fascination. LaCroix paused as he reached the window, peering inside. The puppies were awake, tumbling around inquisitively, and having a rolling good time as they wrestled, their excited yips perfectly audible to him even from behind the security glass. LaCroix stopped, his nose almost touching the glass as he watched their antics. The puppies sensed him, as animals always do, and started growling. As he leaned closer, three of the four scurried as far away from the glass as they could, bristling, growling and shaking in their combined fear and anger. LaCroix moved back slightly. It didn't surprise him, as animals always would react like this to him. But one puppy hadn't moved away. He sat with his little head cocked to the side, staring at him with curiosity. He didn't seem afraid of the man outside the glass.

LaCroix stared at the unprepossessing specimen before him. He was definitely a Heinz 57. He had big paws and a roly-poly body covered with thick darkish fur. He probably was a husky mix with those eyes. Blue eyes. Hesitantly, LaCroix reached out to the glass to touch it, his cold fingertips brushing against the smooth surface, and the puppy actually grinned, his tail wagging furiously as he braced his front paws against the window.

Stupid dog. You don't even have the sense to realize what I am.

Unwilling memories surfaced in LaCroix as he stared at the tiny thing who eyed him so hopefully. His mortal childhood had been so long ago that he rarely could recall much of anything, but he had owned a dog then. For a brief span of time, he had been happy. LaCroix pulled back into the present with a flash of annoyance. He had to stop doing this. It was bad enough that he remembered his childhood at all, but to keep slipping into the past....well at least he didn't do it while he was driving, unlike *some* people he could mention. He stared at the dog and then turned away abruptly. It didn't matter. Who needed the little fur balls anyway?

LaCroix found himself back in a familiar neighborhood the next night. *Might as well be a damned homing pigeon*, he groused to himself. Of course the pet shop was open, and various adults and children were chattering excitedly about the animals within. Perhaps he'd just take a look. There was no obligation, after all.

There were people milling about, and one young man stood eyeing an enormous green parrot in a cage near the front of the store. LaCroix viewed the young man's wardrobe with a jaundiced eye. He was wearing a banded collar shirt and vest, and sported a three day beard. How positively... primitive. It was better than turtlenecks, but still...didn't *anybody* know how to dress any more?

He overheard snatches of the conversation between the young man and an enthusiastic young salesgirl.

"This is James, and the way he acts you'd think he owns the place. He's a very opinionated bird, you know."

LaCroix glanced at the bird, who stared at the vampire unblinkingly, and then proceeded to unload an expertly placed missile on the newspaper below him. The paper headline caught LaCroix's eye: USA Today. How appropriate. The bird bore an uncanny resemblance to the CERK producer who had unloaded the Nightmare Duo From Hell on the station. It fit, somehow, to see him behind bars. *Serves you right, you traitor*, LaCroix thought, and moved on.

The tropical fish did not seem to mind his presence. Neither did the amphibians. LaCroix moved past the hamsters, gerbils, mice and guinea pigs with vague disinterest, noting how their tiny little hearts speeded up as they dove into the cedar chips. Not even worth the

effort, snack-wise. The harried little man who was dealing with the customers finally managed to greet the newest arrival.

"Good evening, sir. Are you being served?"

LaCroix hesitated, his eyes glancing by the various dogs, before mumbling, "No thank you, I'm just looking."

The pet shop owner's eyes narrowed at the challenge the man represented. He had seen how the stranger had looked at the dogs. Persistence was the key.

"Puppies, hmmm? Shall I get a few out for you to look at? We have a very nice selection."

LaCroix had opened his mouth to protest, but the shop owner was reaching inside the cage to pull out an elegant black dog with a beautiful choker collar.

"How about this one? French poodle and very beautiful. She won't be around much longer, and my contract with the breeder ends after this season. You might not see the likes of her in the future."

She did look wonderful, but the dog eyed him with disdain, then turned and flounced away with a superior sniff.

"Or perhaps this one?"

LaCroix stared at the tiny little thing that seemed to be mostly fluff, four paws and a jaunty little bow on top of a tiny head. LaCroix stared wordlessly, then asked almost timidly, "*What* is it?"

"Welsh Corgi, sir."

LaCroix shuddered a bit. No, *definitely* not that one.

"And here we have a lovely purebred, good with children, loyal and obedient."

The yellow haired puppy scurried up to LaCroix, gazed at him for several seconds before he bristled, yapped indignantly and then lifted his leg to water LaCroix's hand-sewn Italian loafers. The owner made a strangled sound of distress as he scooped up the smirking dog. LaCroix eyed the little terror narrowly, and the dog bent his head as it whined and tried to escape.

"I'm so sorry, sir. Here's a towel to wipe your shoes. I can't think of what got into him. He's not the brightest little dog, but he's usually much better mannered.

LaCroix accepted the towel and wiped his dripping shoe. "I see. And what kind of dog is he?"

"Golden Retriever." That, of course, explained everything.

LaCroix viewed some other puppies with bored patience, but all of them either shied away or became aggressive.

"It's odd," the owner remarked, "They really don't seem to like you."

"Perhaps I'm just not a ...dog person" LaCroix said, his expression carefully blank.

There he was, in the last cage. The little dark one from the window. The astute businessman noticed LaCroix's direction of gaze and opened the cage to pull out the dog for the customer's inspection.

"Here you go, sir" he said, and dumped the puppy firmly into LaCroix's hands. The vampire was so startled he almost dropped the dog on its little head. Shifting his grip to try to keep the squirming little bundle from bouncing to the floor, he brought the dog's face to his. The puppy stared at him unblinkingly, then began wagging its tail, and then its whole hind-quarters. It whined happily, looking at the man whose eye color nearly matched its own.

It felt warm. Strange, that he should be so attracted to the little beast. He cradled the dog closer, and the puppy proceeded to chew on the zipper of his black leather bomber jacket. LaCroix absently ran a finger over the little dog's head. The dog was nearly wriggling out of his skin at all the attention. This felt so *normal*. So ordinary and mortal. That thought stopped LaCroix cold, and he stiffened as he handed the dog back to the surprised shop owner.

"Thank you for your time. I don't think I will need to see anything else. I must be going."

"But sir, didn't you like the dog? He certainly seems to have taken a shine to you. I know he's not a pure-bred, but he's a beautiful dog nonetheless."

The stranger in the leather jacket looked cold beyond all imagining, "I said, no thank you."

With that, LaCroix turned on his heel and walked out of the shop, leaving the pet shop owner to stare bewilderedly after him. The young man in the trendy vest moved from the side of the store, commenting, "That looks like a nice dog. May I see him?"

"Sure," the owner muttered absently, still trying to figure out what had happened a few minutes ago. People were so strange.

LaCroix paced down the street, his hands jammed into his jacket pockets.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. You're always harping about how immortals cannot recapture mortal ways, yet you decide to look for a pet. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

He felt cold, despite the mild June weather, and he looked around him before levitating into the air. The wind rushed by him, clearing his senses, but the memories still returned unbidden. It wasn't as if there was any future in investing time in a dog. In all likelihood, he'd be leaving Toronto in the next year or so, so why get bogged down? He was always leaving someone, or some thing, behind.

For a minute, LaCroix almost had a Nick Moment, a brief episode of guilt-ridden angst, which was sort of like a Blond Moment, but with much more catastrophic results. Disaster averted, LaCroix headed for home. It could have been worse. Nicholas had Blond Nick Moments, which in addition to loading the weight of the world, the sins of the fathers and the shame of history on one's shoulders, would also tend to distract one from business at hand or something right under one's nose. LaCroix couldn't imagine being morose *and* unfocused. The thought of suffering for just a moment in the way his protégé did made LaCroix break out in a cold sweat.

LaCroix was in a hurry, as he had to get to the station. But he made time to go past the shop. It had been two days, and despite all his self-arguments, he found himself back where he started. LaCroix reached the store, and there were puppies in the window, but not *his* puppy. Strange, why wasn't he still on display?

He walked into the store, eyes searching but not finding. There he was, in a back cage, but something wasn't right....A middle aged woman minding the shop approached him as he looked at the cage in the back. She smiled at him in a friendly fashion.

"Can I help you, sir?"

"The mixed-breed puppy with blue eyes I saw a couple of days ago, I wanted to..."

"Oh, I'm sorry sir, he was sold yesterday. Perhaps there's another dog you'd like to see?"

LaCroix's stricken expression spoke volumes, before the inscrutable mask descended. He shook his head, and turned to walk out. *Oh dear*, the lady thought, *somebody bought his puppy.* The big kids were always worse than the little ones about that kind of thing.

LaCroix headed for the station. His commentary that night was perhaps a bit more acidic than usual, and he was definitely in a bad mood by midnight. LaCroix pushed the mike button, drawing in a deep breath to close the broadcast. He plucked a rose out of the flower vase and ripped off the petals, one by one. He felt more alone this very minute than he had in at least a century. And royally pissed off.

Damn it, he wanted that dog! And what LaCroix wants.... but of course, how simple. And with that LaCroix smiled. A wonderful, terrible, awful smile. Leaving the building, he headed for the pet store. Ah, luck was with him. The nice middle aged woman was cleaning up inside, and LaCroix knocked on the door. She looked up inquiringly, then a smile of recognition crossed her face. The man who had looked like someone had stolen his last oatmeal cookie when she had informed him that his puppy had been sold. She unlocked the door, peering up at him.

"Yes? Can I help you?"

LaCroix's blue eyes melded with hers, his will drawing out the answers he needed, such as the address of the buyer who had stolen the dog from under his nose. When he broke contact, she blinked, then watched as he walked away, his Loony Tunes T-shirt neatly tucked into his Levi's. hmmm. The man sure did do something for a pair of jeans, especially from this angle....

LaCroix was a vampire on a mission. The Powers That Be could reduce his air time, and change his fellow DJs, but they wouldn't control *him*. After the pitifully easy task of locating the aforementioned address, LaCroix hovered outside the mortal's apartment, looking in the window. It was the young man with the vest he had seen near the parrot cage. So the little upstart thought he could take away what LaCroix wanted? Not bloody likely. No mere mortal with incredibly bad fashion sense was getting *his* dog!

LaCroix knocked at the mortal's door, waiting for the inevitable "Who is it?" Sure enough, there it came.

"Federal Express" he grunted, inspecting the shine on his black cowboy boots. Maybe he should think of getting athletic shoes, especially if he planned on attending any more conventions. Howard Stern had nothing on the Night Crawler when it came to rabid fans.

The door opened, a confused face peeked out from behind the door. With one shove, LaCroix broke the security chain and knocked the man across the room as the door slammed open. The man lay unconscious against the far wall. LaCroix briefly considered killing him, then decided it wasn't worth the effort. The puppy came tumbling out of the bedroom, it's floppy ears perked in curiosity, then in fear as it saw the young man lying motionless on the floor. Uh oh.

Then the puppy saw the tall figure near the door. *It was HIM! Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy! That really awesome dude with the black leather jacket.* LaCroix looked down at the puppy, who was now wagging his tail hopefully. LaCroix, who hadn't had a thing to do with dogs for close to two thousand years, reached down hesitantly. It was all the encouragement the puppy needed. With an excited bark, he leapt into the man's arms, burrowing close into his shirt. *Well, damn,* LaCroix thought, *now if I could only get Janette to act like this....*

LaCroix tucked the puppy under his chin, snuggling it as he stroked its soft fur. The small fuzz ball fur beamed up at him. Awww. How could he disappoint such blind faith? For another dreadful moment, LaCroix felt the coming on of a Nick Attack, another perilous condition his son was prone to, this one best described as a melting warm and fuzzy feeling that predisposed one to good will toward men. *Damn, that had been close!* Much better to keep this on a business-like level. It was *just* a dog.

LaCroix walked out the door and out of the apartment building with the dog. He knew they had to get back to his house by sunrise, but he had to go back to the pet shop one last time. There was one last thing to be done.

The shop was closed, and dark. LaCroix opened the door easily, then moved inside. The cage had a cover over it, which he removed. He stared at the parrot, who woke with an indignant squawk.

The parrot froze as he recognized the intruder. If a bird could swallow convulsively, this one did.

"Well, James, I guess this is it. Thought you were so clever, didn't you? Pulled us out of syndication, changed our team, and prostituted us on the altar of commercial avarice. What *shall* I do with you?"

The puppy barked, and LaCroix seemed amused.

"Hmmm. Well that is one possibility, of course. Still, I'm rather in favor of molting him, tarring and then re-feathering him. What do you say, James?"

The big green bird was edging as far back into his cage as he could, not understanding the evil yellow glow the human's eyes held. Or perhaps not so human after all. It was quick, moderately messy, and extremely final. After five minutes, the only thing left were a few green feathers sticking to the cage door.

I think, perhaps, that CERK will be moving in a different direction, as I plan to buy out the parent company. Then maybe a few U.S. television companies, like that one with those perfectly dreadful sex, danger and bimbette-of-the-week shows.

Life could prove very interesting if he decided to stay in Toronto. Even Janette might reconsider leaving, if he managed to take over the US entertainment industry. And what would he do without Nicholas to torment every now and then? Life would be too boring for words. So maybe the puppy wasn't such a bad idea after all. It would be relaxing to have a dog around, especially if he decided to prey on companies instead of mortals.

He walked out of the shop and carefully relocked the door. He headed down the street, the dog listening intelligently as LaCroix described what their life was going to be like, "... and later I'll take you flying, and we'll go hunting together, and..."

As he moved down the street, a lady looked up as he walked by with the puppy, totally unaware of her watching him. His handsome face was lit with a smile that warmed his austere features. The dog was burrowed in the man's arms, its excited yips interspersed with the man's deep voice murmuring to him. *What a nice man*, she thought, *to love a puppy so much.*

Confess

by Nancy Parry

What are your dreams,
LaCroix?
Do specters
in the likeness of Nick
glide eerily through your daytime slumbers?
Does Janette seduce
and metamorphose?

Have visions of carnage —
blood orgies —
made you wake
with a profound hunger,
not to be quenched?
Will nocturnal reality
ever satisfy
sonorous daylight cravings?

What are your dreams,
LaCroix?
Do demons gambol in your recalcitrant unconscious,
or only laughable ghoulies
lacking in malevolence?
Amusing but not terrifying
the Master Vampire.
Do your dreams
reflect redemption?
Or celebrate slaughter?

And have they ever
come true?

The Master of Immortality

by Teresa Guinn-Garcia

Are not thee the "Master" of your fate — of all you convey?
To possess the power to control
By thought, word, and deed,
Doth make you the "master" of all indeed.

As a spider spins his web
A lesser creature to snare
So helpless and unwanton there,
So does the "Master" create his illusion.
The force that drives mankind to where
He wants, needs to hold and keep us near.

We are made to feel secure
Amid the fear and doubt we do endure.
We nurture the power of his touch,
Find desperate need to want, to have
That of which he possesses much.

We beg for tender mercy because we believe,
We feel that we must,
Yet long desperately for the "gift" of immortality
Amid a moment of his passion and lust.

Yes, 'tis true,
The "Master" is heir apparent over all he is to convey.
He loves, he mates, he takes
Leaving countless immortal souls along the way.

The Knight of the Soul

by M. C. Schisler

He was a knight in moral armour
in service to his lord,
brought down by duplicity and cunning
then forced into religious discord.

Sent to the East to fight for the Faith,
his mild nature was transformed.
Becoming disillusioned and sorely weary,
he desires to be reborn.

Instead, he encounters Evil Incarnate
in the form of Lust and Power;
they promise him lives eternal
but it's his soul they wish to devour.

Brought freely across yet with regret
then convinced the path was right,
he becomes immersed in deadly acts
hunting and killing at night.

Eight hundred years of bloody nights
and scarred by remorse and disgust,
he longs to redeem his tortured soul,
thus compelled to reach out, to trust.

Through fire and smoke a saviour is found
who offers friendship and hope.
Full of confidence and trusting in science,
She proposes strategies to cope.

There are no miracles she can produce
overnight or in a day,
that may reverse forever the curse
which has held him in its sway.

The path now chosen must be lived and endured
in spite of its trials and sorrows.
There is no escape from his eternal struggle.
Yet, faith dictates a far brighter tomorrow.

Unfinished Business: Atonements

by Bettie J. Brown

The full moon peeked through the gauzy curtain of clouds while a soft rain fell on the somber gathering at the gravesite. The family and friends of Nicholas Knight had come to pay their respects. He had finally achieved his ultimate goal of mortality and, with it, death's embrace. In spite of his unusual request for a night burial, none of his friends had hesitated to come, a tribute to the humanity he had reclaimed.

"Knight always loved the night shift. I guess he couldn't resist a final joke," Don Schanke whispered into Natalie's ear, bringing a smile to her face. Leave it to Schanke to find a way to lessen her grief, if only slightly. He took her hand in his, squeezing it gently, lending support in his own unique manner. They once again fell silent as the priest cleared his throat and began to speak.

Apart from the solemn group at the gravesite stood an elegantly dressed man and woman. The strangers garnered surreptitious glances from the mourners. No one recognized them. The ceremony would not have been complete without their presence. Natalie stared at them, willingly meeting LaCroix's gaze, then turned again to face the priest.

She reached out with her mind to the occupant of the simple mahogany casket trimmed in brass. *They came, Nick. Now you can truly rest in peace, my love. God, I miss you already. Wait for me, my love. Wait for me* — Her tears fell unashamed on her cheeks.

Her son moved closed and offered his mother the support of his arm. Leaning down he asked, in a voice pitched for her ears only, "Who are those people, mother? Do you know them?"

"Old friends of your father's. I'm glad they could make it. I'm sure your father is pleased," she replied.

"I thought I knew all of Father's friends." When his mother did not explain further, her son returned his attention to the priest as he finished the service.

Natalie placed a single yellow rose on the coffin. Her eyes never left it as it was lowered into the ground. Outwardly calm. A pillar of strength to her family. Inwardly, her heart was slowly ripped away

— inch by inch, as the coffin disappeared into the earth. Her inner voice was merciless in its chastisement. *I gave you what you wanted, Nick. I have only myself to blame. I'd hoped I would be the first to go, not you, Nick. It went by too quickly. If only I'd left you alone. You'd still be alive.*

Remembrance of Nicholas' last words to her came unbidden. "Don't blame yourself, Nat. I have no regrets. I wouldn't trade our years together for an eternity as a vampire..."

"No, you wouldn't have, Nick. But I can't help but miss you. My heart will always be yours, my darling. Good-bye, my love."

The crowd slowly dissipated. Schanke gave Natalie a final hug, then left with his daughter, Jenny, and her husband. His three grandchildren, all boys, had gone on ahead. They were too full of life to notice their own mortality. As he passed, Schanke again looked at the strange couple. They were vaguely familiar. Especially the woman. She looked just like — Jean - Janey? Nah! She was too young. "My old eyes must be playing tricks on me."

Nicholas' family still lingered. Lucien, the eldest. Tall, dark, a carbon copy of his father with the same piercing blue eyes. Nicole, the middle child, gripping her husband's arm for dear life, her red-gold hair a mass of curls as her mother's had been. Janine, the youngest, had her father's blonde hair and keen cop's instincts. A chip off the old detective's block. They stood there, in a protective semi-circle around their mother, offering the comfort of their love. Allowing her the privacy to say her final farewell.

"You all go ahead to the house. I'll meet you there," Natalie suggested. Before they could raise their voices in protest, she continued, "I see some friends of Nick's I want to talk to. I won't be long." Her tone brooked no argument.

Natalie slowly approached LaCroix and Janette, composing her face. Once again, the cool, detached professional of years gone by. "Thank you for coming. Nick would have been pleased to know you came. It means — a lot to me as well." Looking directly at LaCroix she said, "I know this can't be easy for you. Your sacrifice is appreciated. I know what you did for my husband. You gave him peace. A chance to settle things between you." Were those unshed tears she saw in his eyes? LaCroix? Yes, LaCroix. *You loved him*

more than any of us, didn't you, LaCroix? Although, I'm sure, you'd never admit it. Aloud she said, "Your being with him — at the end...I knew when he asked us to go home that he wouldn't last much longer. I knew he was waiting for you...waiting to say good-bye to his — father. It's not easy to watch someone you love die. I..." Her voice faltered.

LaCroix gathered her gently into his arms, holding her in a moment of shared misery. Janette stood by and watched the two old enemies comfort one another over their mutual loss. *Our loss*, she corrected in her mind. *Oh, Nikola, Nikola, you are sorely missed.*

After a few moments they broke apart. LaCroix searched Natalie's face, then asked, "Does it surprise you that I, too, can grieve?"

"No. I know how much you loved — Nicholas."

"Do you? Do you really?" Sarcasm dripped from his lips. His eyes hardened for an instant, then relented. "This is not the time for old hurts and recriminations. We share a loss. We shall comfort one another. After all, we are — family."

Natalie took a moment before saying, "You're right. We are a family, of sorts. The rest of the family is gathered at our...my home. It's time you met your grandchildren."

GRANDCHILDREN! The word echoed. Nicholas was not totally lost to him after all. He had a son, daughters.

Janette had been quiet during the exchange. She was now picking up the direction of LaCroix's thoughts. *No, LaCroix. Not that.* Janette spoke up quickly, "Natalie, your invitation is tempting, but I don't think we should intrude..."

"Nonsense! It would be an honor to accompany you and finally meet the rest of my family," LaCroix said. A warning glance stopped any further protest from Janette.

His emphasis on that last word sent a chill down Natalie's spine. Had she, in a moment of weakness, made a terrible mistake? With Nick dead, how safe were they from LaCroix? Too late, far too late, to change things now. Natalie prayed silently, *God, please look over us and protect my family. I promise you, Nick, I will not allow him to harm the children. I will stop him. I will find a way.*

The house was Country French Provincial, beautifully decorated. A place for everything and everything in its place. A reflection of the minimalist taste of its owners. Its walls radiated the love that existed within. She could still sense his presence here; still expected his voice to call her name. It was here, to this monument to love, that LaCroix and Janette came. And with them came a possible threat to the legacy of that love. Only time would tell. Natalie held on to hope.

There were three of them. Three chances of reclaiming that which had been lost to him. The possibilities reverberated through his mind. "LaCroix!" A familiar voice whispered his name. Nicholas? Impossible! "LaCroix, remember your promise." There it was again, so clear. Nicholas was inside his head.

"LaCroix?" He turned to face Janette's puzzled expression. "Are you all right? You looked — preoccupied." He waved her off. "A beautiful home, *n'cest pas*?" she commented. "French. Old habits die hard."

They followed Natalie to the front door, which opened at their approach. A red-haired female with a concerned expression eyed the two suspiciously. "Mother, what took you so long? We were beginning to get worried."

"I told you I would be along, Nicole," Natalie scolded gently. "We have guests. This is LaCroix and Janette. The friends of your father I mentioned before. Have you forgotten your manners? Allow our guests inside." Natalie brushed past her daughter, with LaCroix and Janette in tow. The rest of the family flowed into the entry hall, eager to meet the strangers that had so intrigued them at the burial.

"This is Lucien, our eldest..." Natalie began.

"Lucien?" LaCroix interrupted, an indescribable expression on his face.

"Yes. I was named for my paternal grandfather," Lucien informed LaCroix.

"Were you? Were you really?" A smile spread across his lips.

"Nicole you've already met," Natalie continued the introductions. "Her husband, Ross; and finally, our youngest, Janine."

"Janine?" Now it was Janette's turn to be surprised.

"Father insisted on French names, his family's heritage," Janine explained. Looking at Janette she inquired, "How long have you known Father? I don't remember him mentioning a LaCroix or Janette. And father's friends are usually a lot older."

"This is not an interrogation, Jan. Allow our guests to catch their breath before you bring out the rubber hoses. You must forgive my sister," Lucien apologized. "She's fresh out of the Academy and thinks she's Columbo."

"I'm just asking what's on everyone else's mind."

"They came to offer their condolences, Jan. Let's not make them regret it." Lucien flashed a reassuring smile at the couple and led them to the spacious living room. They were offered seats on the well cushioned sofa, positioned comfortably in front of the roaring fire built to keep the evening's chill at bay. Natalie found herself seated on the sofa surrounded by the enemy.

"You have an elegant home, Natalie. And a gracious family. Thank you for allowing us the opportunity to become acquainted. What, if anything, has Nicholas told the children of his life...before you?" LaCroix's smile was deceptively pleasant, but the eyes were measuring, calculating. Old habits, indeed. Nicholas wasn't the only one who found the past hard to let go.

Natalie's answer was short and to the point. "Nothing. We thought it best that they know nothing of his — association with you and Janette."

"But he named his children for us, didn't he? I'm touched." Lucien... Lucien had taken his breath away. The very image of Nicholas. *I must have him. By rights he belongs to me — they* ***all*** *belong to me!* That belief threatened to crowd out all rational thought from his mind. Grief, recognized or not, was a cruel taskmaster.

"Lucien, Nicole and Janine are my blood, LaCroix. You can not own them. You lost this battle years ago." Nicholas spoke to him as clearly as if he were standing in the room. Challenging him for the souls of his children.

"I lost my conscience centuries ago, Nicholas. I will not have you trying to provide me with yours! I watched you die, Nicholas. I don't owe you anything further. Our covenant ended with you. The children are mine. Rest in peace, Nicholas. There's nothing you can

do now! Your precious Natalie won't stop me! I will claim that which is owed me!"

"LaCroix! Are you all right?" Janette inquired a second time. "You've been mumbling to yourself. If this is disturbing you, perhaps we should leave."

"Perhaps we should. Natalie, we have intruded on your hospitality long enough..."

"But you just got here." Inside, Natalie breathed a sigh of relief. The family was becoming too curious about their guests' connection to Nick.

"We came out of courtesy. This is a time preserved for you and your family. Please, do not hesitate to call on us should you have need." Ever the gentleman, LaCroix kissed Natalie's hand and departed with Janette. The hackles on Natalie's neck had risen. LaCroix was up to something that would not bode well for her family.

Janette had barely spoken during the meeting between LaCroix and Nicholas' family. Her family, as well. *It's such a beautiful family, Nikola,* she thought. *You have a right to be proud. And Lucien...Lucien is so much as you were in the beginning. Too much like you, mon Nikola. LaCroix will never leave him alone, not now that he knows of his existence.* Her continence had a pensive air. She feared for the children's safety. Especially Lucien.

"Please, LaCroix." Once again Nicholas pleaded with him to stay. He was so weak. So vulnerable. Death personified. His thin, pale hand reached out for LaCroix.

"We fathers sometimes are forced to do heartbreaking things concerning our children..."

"Yes, Nicholas. We do. I let you go. I can't repeat that mistake. I must make amends. I'll save your son, Nicholas. Lucien will not die! I will not lose him, as I lost you. None of them."

"All things must die eventually..." The memory of Nicholas' words taunted him. "I want to show you there's no reason to fear, no reason to be afraid."

"I can't, Nicholas. I can't let them go!"

"Please! Father!"

"Leave me alone, Nicholas! Leave me alone! I will not be haunted by you. I will not...!"

"Apparently, you already are, LaCroix." He had not felt her enter. Janette stood before him still dressed for Nicholas' burial. She had not slept. Thin lines of red stained her perfect face, evidence of her ability to shed tears, even after so long. "Maybe if you left his family in peace, he wouldn't haunt your dreams." Her voice was cold, flat, unemotional, belying the desperate hope of the speaker.

"I will do as I please, Janette. I need no advice from you!"

"I would <u>never</u> presume to give you advice, LaCroix. I was just making an observation. Nicholas tried to teach you something; apparently you missed the lesson. Death is a part of life, LaCroix. Let him go. Don't try to recapture him by claiming his children. Do you think I'm blind? I saw how you looked at him!"

"Lucien! Say it — Lucien! He was named for me! He <u>belongs</u> to me!"

"And just how do you come to that conclusion?"

"If I hadn't brought Nicholas over, he and Natalie would have never met, married and started a family. They owe their lives to me."

"They owe you nothing, LaCroix. You did everything you could to keep Nicholas a vampire. You sabotaged his efforts at every step. The children owe their lives to their <u>parents</u>. We are nothing to them. We should stay away and allow them to live their lives."

"I...<u>CAN'T</u>. They are my — <u>FAMILY</u>! You should understand how it feels, Janette. They are your family, too."

"And I am willing to let them be, LaCroix. If you ever truly loved Nicholas, really valued his gift to you, you would, too."

"Your grief has made you bold, Janette. I suggest you become more cautious with your words to me."

Janette felt a momentary glimmer of fear, but it passed. *I must not allow him to harm Nicholas' family. I must make him see how foolish it would be.* "If Nicholas wanted his children to become as us, he would have told them of our existence. We should honor his memory by honoring his choice to be <u>human</u> and have a <u>human</u> family. Death is a part of that humanity."

"Enough! You are trying to appeal to my better nature. We both know I have none. I will do what I will, but for now Nicholas' family is safe. I will allow them time to mourn. I make no promise about the future. I told you, you belonged to me. If not you, then your

blood. But, for now, win, Nicholas. I will permit them their humanity. My gift to you. But don't expect it to last forever. As you said, 'Nothing is forever.'" Not regret. Not grief.

Not...atonements.

Natalie's Lament

by Nancy Parry

Nick...
the reality of you
cannot be,
and yet you are as real
as my desire.
As tangible
as the dreams you arouse,
refusing to set me free.

Freedom is the last thing I would seek.
Imprison me
in your arms.
Acknowledge my devotion
to you,
to your quest,
to our future...
let me hope for tomorrow
amid this cold and eternal present.

I am haunted
by a cruel specter —
images of your lips.
Full and generous,
as they brush my face,
driving me wild
with their promise of heaven.
And yet no such pledge is fulfilled.
Only hope
and despair
ride on your touch.

Bring me over,
if there is no other course.
Deliver me from daylight wanderings,
that we might
ride the night sky
together.

Love Feast

by M. C. Schisler

I
am a banquet
of love
that welcomes its guests
to partake of its riches
drink in its pleasures
and revel in the sensuous
eradicating all guilt

I
am a feast
a celebration of life
that worships beauty
with burnt offerings to share
and immortality as gifts
eternity the prize
for its payment
the soul

I
am the host
whose invitation you've received
that no one dares to refuse
who has impeccable taste
delights in conversation
provides for your every comfort
inquires about your health
entertains with games
seduces your mind
erases your memory
accepts final payment
then claims you as his own
I am your host
my name is Death

Commandment to Life

by Teresa Guinn-Garcia

To be wise is to have the wisdom of the ancients.

To love is to have the appreciation to be loved.

To protect is to have the desire for self-preservation.

To be humble is to care for all of mankind,
irregardless of shortcoming.

To have the ability to forgive lest we not forget.

To be the "Master" of souls, the "father" of children,
the "leader" of your domain —
One must be a titan among heroes,
Must have the strength and power over all he is to convey.

To be mortal in character, though immortal in spirit —
A "free" agent,
One must appreciate life and seek all that it has to give.

To "master" immortality would be but the most wonderful
"Gift" that life has to offer,
That we could attain/possess for the asking
While enjoying all that there is to achieve along the way.

Only a Word on a Guilded Page

by Winifred McBeth

Miklos made one last check of his stock before looking up and locking eyes with the blonde at the end of the bar. He immediately tried to pretend he hadn't seen her.

"Bartender!" she said heartily. "Another round!"

Miklos moved his hands nervously but did not begin to fill the order. "Paige, don't you think..."

"Miklos!" The green eyes went wide, a pale hand lifted to the heart. "Misha. Just one drink — my first tonight."

"Ah, but I'm afraid that last night you rather overindulged." At this arch reprimand, Paige turned to face the mistress of The Raven.

"Don't be silly, Janette." she protested.

"You were hanging from the chandelier," Janette said bluntly.

"I was perfectly..." Paige was beginning to sputter.

"Reciting poetry," Janette continued.

"I would never..." Paige cast about for support. "Miklos, help me here."

He sighed and looked at Janette, then at Paige. With an apologetic expression, he said, "'Full fathom five my father lies/of his bones are coral made.'" 1

Paige conceded defeat. "Wishful thinking. Where is the old reprobate, anyway?" She made a grab for a wine bottle. "I have a present for him."

"Paige!" Janette grabbed the bottle back and handed it to Miklos. "Don't let Himself hear you talk like that! You remember what happened the last time."

Paige's eyes narrowed. "Vividly. That's why I brought my little present." She reached into the pouch she had slung on her hip and pulled out a book.

"Fahrenheit 451?" Janette raised an eyebrow.

Paige nodded. "In an asbestos cover. Very rare. It was that or the Gutenberg. Suitable that a book should burn him." Her smile had a nasty edge to it. "Tis a conflagration devoutly to be wished."2

"Paige..." Janette began to remonstrate but said instead, "If you'd get out more, you'd hold your drink better. Don't you do anything besides read?"

Startled blink. "Why?"

"Books are so...lifeless. They don't..." A delicate hand searched the air for the right word.

"Bleed?" Paige supplied.

"Exactly," Janette agreed.

"You know, a much awarded author once said that the only way to write is to 'sit down and open a vein.'"3

"Oh, really?" Interest gleamed in Janette's eyes. "What a delicious notion."

"Somehow, I knew you'd say that." Paige exchanged a look with Miklos. "Now, if I could have my drink, I've got to get back to my bookstore. We're having an open-all-night sale."

"One glass if," Janette held up a warning hand, "you sit quietly in the corner. No chandeliers. No poetry."

"I brought a book," Paige assured her, holding it up as evidence. A garish cover declared it to be The Denied by Emily Weiss. "It's okay, but not nearly as good as Elro —"

"Out!" Janette was instantly livid. "Get out of my club with that trash!"

Paige was utterly bewildered. "What? Don't I get my drink first?"

"'Nevermore,'" a voice said sonorously.4

Janette pivoted to glare at Miklos. Miklos had made himself scarce.

"Remind me again. Why am I here?" Nick guided his beloved car into a newly opened parking space and then looked over at Grace.

She patted his arm and explained patiently, "Because you volunteered, detective. It was very decent of you."

"I volunteered?" True to his training, he went around to the passenger side of the car and held the door for Grace and her friend, who had been sitting quietly in the back seat.

"Yes. Don't you remember? Natalie and I were moving the examining table and you said..."

"'Do you need any more help?'," Nick finished for her.

Grace's friend broke her silence with a low chuckle. "You had no chance, Detective Knight. Grace is very adept at her machinations."

The woman who spoke had skin nearly as dark as Grace's but her hair had gone white. The color of her hair was the only thing that betrayed her age. Shining out from her was the vigor and enthusiasm of a woman in her prime.

She went on to explain, "We need you to help us transport the books we will buy for my little schoolroom. I get what donations I can, but I still have to be penny-wise."

"You're a teacher?" Nick's manner immediately became more deferential.

"I'd thought I had retired," she said ruefully. "But so many of my neighbors are new to this country and need to learn English. They had little or no opportunities for education in their homelands."

Grace put in, "Not to mention the local kids who have no one at home to encourage them to excel. They think power lies in gang strength, not in personal achievement. Althea shows them that knowledge is power." She looked pleadingly at Nick, as though she feared to be abandoned at the doorstep.

"I'm in," he assured her. "Just get me home by sunrise."

"Deal." Much, relieved, Grace led the trio into the bookshop. The sign overhead named the place as "The Gilded Page". Another sign explained the rules of the all-night sale: during the hour of one a.m., a ten percent discount; during the hour of two a.m., a twenty percent discount; the discounts increasing to fifty percent ending at dawn.

"Shall we try children's books or literature?" Althea wondered aloud. Nick stayed back as the two women conferred.

"Nicholas?" Nick was startled to recognize the voice.

"Paige?" He looked in surprised recognition at the tall, slender vampire with short curls as fair as his own.

"What have you been up to?" Paige pressed a hand to her forehead as though to push the memory forward. "What did I read: 'A red cross knight forever kneel'd / To a lady on his shield / That sparkled on the yellow field / Beside remote Shallot'?"5

The former crusader cleared his throat. "That was someone else."

"Oh, I haven't found that book you were asking about," she apologized. "It's not in the library at Perth or the museum in Zurich. I'll keep looking."

"Detective?" Althea returned alongside Grace. "We've made a list based on our budget. We'll definitely need the trunk space in your car."

Paige beamed. "You've picked some books out? I could show you my favorites."

"Thank you," Althea said graciously. "We're on a rather tight budget, I'm afraid."

"This woman is a teacher, Paige." Nick had a gleam in his eye that rivaled Grace at the top of her game. "She offers literacy classes in her neighborhood."

"You teach people to read?" The vampire's eyes widened and she took a step back as though she stood before someone holy enough to burn her to a crisp. "Can I help?"

Althea held up her list. "We've picked out some books. Would you have any reading primers?"

"I'm sure I can find some." Paige was already bustling Althea through the stacks. "Pick out what you need; it's on the house!"

Grace hung behind, staring in amazement at Paige. She looked askance at Nick. "You're good, detective."

He shrugged modestly. "Paige believes that outside of a dog, a book is a man's best friend."

Grace chimed in on the finish of the quip. "Inside a dog, it's too dark to read."6

When the car was finally loaded, Nick was having serious doubts about the suspension. Althea had invited Paige to have a look at the one-woman schoolhouse that her bookstore was supplying. The trunk had barely closed. As it was, everyone but the driver was sitting with books on their laps and underfoot.

"Stop here, detective," Althea directed. The "school" was located in a one-story storefront under the rare streetlamp that still offered light.

A crowd composed mostly of older women milled on the sidewalk in distress. A murmur of Chinese needed no translation to convey

the fear of the women. Paige made a respectful bow to the eldest and began chattering away in Chinese.

"What's going on here?" Althea demanded. "Gryphon, what happened?" She singled out a husky young man tricked out in faded jeans and a studded leather jacket.

He shrugged and pointed. "Look for yourself." The window of the storefront and the side walls had been spray-painted with crude graffiti.

"Class was breaking up and the Shock Troops blew past. The ladies stayed inside, so they're not hurt." He shook his head, disgusted. "At least they didn't break the windows again."

"Shock Troops?" Nick demanded brusquely.

"The Shock Troops are a gang that thinks they own this neighborhood," Grace explained. "They've got a lot of the residents convinced that they do. Drugs, guns, you-name-it and they run it. What they don't like is people who can think for themselves."

"Gryphon here used to run with them," Althea put in, adding with some pride, "he's planning to go to university next year on a scholarship."

Gryphon shrugged off the praise. "They're making things really tough on us. I don't think your English class is coming back."

The teacher turned her attention again to the group on the sidewalk. They had surrounded Paige, who was talking animatedly, gesturing at the graffiti.

"What is she saying?" Gryphon wondered.

Nick hesitated in mild embarrassment before offering a running translation.

"Grandmother, why are you afraid of these words? They mean nothing!" In elaborate pantomime, Paige waved a dismissing hand and turned her back on the vandalized window.

The eldest shook her head and the others followed suit. "The gang painted this. They threaten to harm us. We are not safe here!"

Paige disagreed emphatically. "These children fear you," she insisted. "They know the power you will have when you can read." She closed her fist, prize held in her hand. "Then you can weigh the worth of these words and know them for the lies that they are!"

Althea spoke up, in English, "Do you always want your daughters to tell you what the newspapers say, instead of reading for yourselves?"

"Do you always get what you want when you buy groceries by the picture on the package?" Gryphon asked.

"Do you want to read to your grandchildren in a language they know better than you?" Grace challenged.

Nick saw that the persuasion was beginning to work but it was still blocked by fear.

One of the younger women in the group argued, "That does not protect us when they throw things."

"We'll guard you," Gryphon promised. "Heron and Jerri and I can escort you from work to here."

"I will help, too," Paige added impulsively.

"No." Nick argued in Chinese for some measure of privacy. "You are too young." She was, in fact, older than the honored grandmother, but "impetuous", "immature" and "foolhardy" did not translate gracefully into Chinese.

The female vampire set her jaw stubbornly. "I can protect them," she said firmly. "I am not a child."

The grandmother aimed a canny look at Nicholas and then at Paige. "If your sister will stay with us, I will come," she announced. The other women murmured at this but nodded agreement. Nick was too flustered to deny relation to Paige.

Althea, Grace and Gryphon had been watching the exchange in confusion. Nicholas enlightened them. "If there is an escort, they will come back. Paige has volunteered to be an escort." He said the last a bit sourly.

"Fine," Heron said firmly. "We'll guard the ladies on their way to class and their way home."

"Why don't you call the police?" Nick insisted. "If the class would testify..." This suggestion was cut off by a very negative murmur from the group.

"The police," Althea explained carefully, "would come and take statements. They would sympathize and they would leave. We don't have the kind of evidence that leads to arrests. Police would agitate the Shock Troops and leave the neighborhood to deal with them."

"If this escalates..." Nick objected.

"If this escalates, we will give the police every cooperation," Althea assured him. "As it is, we have to fight our own battles."

Nick appealed to Grace with a look, hoping to find support in a colleague. There was no support forthcoming. "Althea's right. Without evidence, you can't do anything, detective. We have to let the neighborhood find its own solution."

The detective reluctantly agreed. Paige came up behind him and said softly, "'Our feelings we with difficulty smother / When constabulary duty's to be done; / Ah, take one consideration with another, / A policeman's lot is not a happy one.'"7 The dirty look he shot her did not discourage her in the least.

"Come, see the books we have brought," Paige invited cheerily, leading the women back to the car.

A book brigade from car to storefront directed attention from any unpleasantness for the next hour or so. Nick fretted about shaving the sunrise deadline while Paige completed hasty plans for a mural to cover the graffiti.

"Heron is really good with spray paint," Gryphon assured her. "We'll have that covered up by tonight."

"Even the glass?" Paige asked the question while being pulled away by Nicholas.

"May as well," Gryphon shrugged. "We'll have our own stained glass window."

Paige nodded enthusiastically before Nick shoved her into his Caddy. By the look on his face, she was lucky to be riding on the front seat and not in the trunk.

"Paige," he began forcefully, "Grace is my friend. I work with her at the Department. If you fly off the handle at that gang..." He divided his looks between the younger vampire and the traffic signals. "And I do mean fly...I will not be the only one you will have to answer to!"

Riding on a contact high from carrying in the books, Paige merely grinned. "Relax, crusader."

"Don't you call me that!" Nick snapped.

"I've had my binge at The Raven," she assured him. "I'll be a model of excruciatingly correct behavior." She posed herself primly

on the seat: feet flat on the floor, hands folded in her lap, eyes turned ingenuously toward her elder. "No poetry. No chandeliers."

Safely parked in front of The Gilded Page, Nick rested his head on the steering wheel and regretted that he could not pray for strength. "Out. Get out of my car." He made shooing motions at her. He shouted a last, desperate piece of advice. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do!"

Paige showed up after the late shift at the factory where the younger women worked. Honored grandmother had gotten an escort from her apartment to the factory..

The vampire bowed solemnly and greeted them politely in Chinese.

"We must use English," the eldest declared, "if we are to learn it."

"As you wish, grandmother," Paige acquiesced. "I am pleased that you agreed to continue your lessons."

The old woman looked sharply at her. "We will continue if you protect us."

"You have my word, grandmother," Paige vowed solemnly.

Thus assured, the women followed her like a line of ducklings down the sidewalk.

"Grandmother?" The eldest cocked her head at this address. "Do you know the story of Golden Eyes?" This was the Chinese version of the Cinderella story. Grandmother nodded. "I would be pleased if you would tell it to me in English as we go."

Welcoming an exercise of their new language, each of the women contributed to the story. Paige was puzzling out the difference between "shoe" and "slipper" when the caravan came up against a blockade of Shock Troopers.

The trio of gang members stood in position across the sidewalk. The one in the center stood a head above the others, a solid column of muscle dressed in army fatigues and sporting an army haircut. Although physically smaller, the two flanking were nearly identical in black fatigues.

"You're in my way." Paige looked up at the largest one without backing down.

"Am I, now?" He swung a chain in a lazy circle. "What are you going to do about it?"

Paige's eyes narrowed. "Ask you to move."

The big one laughed heartily at that, sharing the joke with his sycophants. The line of ladies behind Paige began to back away.

"Fine," the vampire snarled, "I'll move you myself." She struck a low blow that brought the leader to his knees, and dropped him with a chop to the back of the head. The first of the remaining pair to swing at her was backhanded into the wall. For the next, Paige caught the wrist and pushed on the elbow until it snapped.

Paige hissed at the trio as they retreated in limping disarray. Too late, she realized that her charges had seen her face. She closed her eyes and her mouth and gathered her control. When she opened them again, the grandmother was staring at her with a satisfied set to her mouth and the same canny look she had turned on Nick.

The whispers were passing among the women. "Kitsune," they said. They named her for a fox-faerie, a shapeshifter who gave help to mortals.

"Grandmother," Paige spoke tremulously. This was much more serious than poetry or chandeliers.

"If you guard us," the eldest told her firmly, "we will come."

"Yes, grandmother." Paige bowed very low. She straightened and turned to lead the group forward again. "Now, what happened when the girl put on the golden slipper?"

The story passed the time it took to walk the rest of the way to the storefront. Paige saw her charges inside and darted back out to admire the murals on the wall and the window.

Gryphon introduced her to Heron, the mural artist. True to her name, Heron was tall and thin with a narrow crest of bright red hair down the middle of her head.

"This is marvelous!" Paige enthused. Heron shrugged and ducked her head.

"It came out okay." The mural showed a man sitting in a chair before a large, open book. A blast of energy from the book blew over him and behind the chair manifested into horses and sailing ships and dragons and rockets and wizards trailing rainbows from their hands. When Heron pointed out each feature, the marks of old needle

tracks stood out on her arms. "I used to see this kind of stuff when I was high, but it would always turn dark and nasty and try to eat me."

"You can always close a book," Paige agreed. "Who is that?" She pointed.

"Morpheus. Don't you read Neil Gaiman?" Heron tried not to sound horrified. "I've got to loan you my reprint copy of High Price of Living. You'll like his sister, Death."

Paige raised her eyebrows, but nodded.

Gryphon tugged at the vampire's arm. "If you want to see really fine art, you've got to see the window." He led Paige out to the front.

"It's a motorcycle," she observed with a mystified look.

"It's a Harley." Gryphon's face and voice showed a man in love. He laid a gentle hand on the painting. "Just like mine."

"Where is it?" Paige scanned the sidewalk.

A heavy, heartbroken sigh. "I had to sell her. Stuff came up: food, rent."

The vampire searched the pouch she always carried. She pulled out a copy of I See by my Outfit by Peter S. Beagle. "Here. This will take you places, too. It's not quite as good as bugs in your teeth, but it'll do."

She was rewarded to see Gryphon laugh. "Thanks. Thanks a lot."

Heron teased, "A man writes a love song for his Harley, you don't expect him to get over it so easily."

"You write music?" The vampire was intrigued.

Heron wrinkled her nose. "No, he makes raps. Not the same. Not at all."

Gryphon tossed his head scornfully. "You have no taste."

"Can I hear it?" Paige coaxed. Gryphon was reluctant but even Heron relented and agreed to listen. The two women beat out a rhythm track with the flat of their hands on their legs while Gryphon chanted out his "Harley Love".

"That is so..." Paige held up her hands to define a large space that her words could not fill. "It beats like a heart! It sounds tribal."

"I have no tribe," Gryphon's pleasure dimmed. "Since I left the Shock Troops."

"They left you for dead," Heron whispered. "You run with us, now."

The young man rested his hand on the Harley. "It's not the same without wheels, though."

Their talk was interrupted as class dismissed and was divided into three travel parties. Gryphon left with the first group. Heron left next, only then remembering her promise to loan her book to Paige.

"It's in the school," she shouted hastily down the sidewalk.

"Could I come back and read it?" the vampire begged Althea.

"I'll have to loan you my keys, but I don't see why not," the teacher consented.

Thus assured, the "Kitsune" left with her grandmother and teacher in tow and flew back to the storefront to start reading.

Paige, closeted in a back room, was so absorbed in Heron's book that she took no notice of the sound of a lock being forced. She did not hear a quiet splashing or the first soft crackle of fire traveling down a stream of gasoline

What did catch her attention was the smell of burning books. She screamed in anger and ran into the fire toward the bookshelves. The vampire was reaching out to a flaming shelf when she was grabbed roughly from behind and dragged free of the building

"Let me go!" she shouted. "I can get those books out!"

"Paige!" Nicholas was shaking her. "You will burn if you go back!" He did not let go until she acknowledged this.

"Are there any other people in there?" the detective demanded.

"No." Paige shook as she watched the flames rise, fed by the books inside.

"I came to check up on you. It's just as well I did. Did you see anyone? Hear anything?" the policeman prompted.

"No," Paige said miserably. "I was reading in the back room."

Nick withheld comment on someone who could have a building burn down around them unnoticed. "I've called in for backup and for the fire department." He shook his head. "I doubt they can do much now."

"The Shock Troops did this," Paige accused tersely.

"Did you see them?" Nick argued. "Do you have any proof?"

"Proof? Nicholas, they have the most to lose if the people in this neighborhood can stand up for themselves! They can't recruit kids who are headed for university!" In her agitation, Paige began to shout over the sound of approaching sirens.

"This is a police matter now, Paige," Nick insisted. "We will catch this gang, but we need evidence. You can't just hunt them down!" Nick forestalled the younger vampire's response by asking, "What would Althea say?"

This stopped any retort, but she continued to glare at him all the while that he was making his report to the uniforms and the senior firefighter on the scene.

He had just come back to her again to say, "Paige, you'll have to give a statement," when the woman spotted a dark figure standing apart from the crowd of gawkers.

"You!" The exclamation gave Nicholas enough warning to get a firm hold on Paige before she tried to dive at LaCroix. This did not stop her arms from flailing out toward the master vampire.

"'You squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner!'" she shrieked hoarsely. 8

"Paige!" Nick warned her desperately. There was no way of telling if LaCroix was amused at what he saw or at what he was planning to do to her later.

Paige continued to try to reach LaCroix. "'If I could work my will, every fool who goes about...'" At this point, Nick freed a hand and put it over her mouth. She continued to rant under the gag.

"Nicholas," LaCroix told him calmly, "let her finish."

"'...and buried with a stake of holly through his heart!'" It seemed that she had temporarily wound down, but Nick did not let her go.

"Paige." LaCroix stood at ease with his hands clasped behind his back. "How good to see you again."

"You bookburner!" Having let loose with the worst obscenity in her vocabulary, Paige threw in a hateful glare.

"Paige. I haven't burned one of your libraries in...oh..." a bored shrug, "it's been too long."

"That doesn't bring back my illuminated Chaucer," she snapped.

"Nor did it teach you your manners," LaCroix observed. "However, I come with a peace offering. I'll help you hunt down these vandals."

"Really?" Paige brightened. "Like the Klansmen?"

"Yes," LaCroix nodded indulgently, "and like the SS officers."

"No!" Nick protested.

Paige twisted around to make eye contact. "Nicholas! They set the building on fire! There were books in there! They teach people to read in there! If we let them go, they'll do it again!"

"We can't have that, can we?" LaCroix smiled thinly. "What is that phrase you are so fond of?"

"'Sometimes it is enough to show teeth, but if you bite, bite deep'," Paige quoted easily.9

"Eloquently put. Now come, Paige," he gestured abruptly. "We'll go hunting."

"No!" Nick objected firmly, maintaining his hold on Paige. "This is a police matter now. The cops are here, and the fire department! We'll take care of it."

The master vampire smiled condescendingly at his wayward protégé. "But your way is not nearly so satisfying as mine, Nicholas."

"Paige," Nicholas began to argue desperately, "what did Althea say?"

Paige squirmed in his arms. "She said that the police couldn't do anything."

"She said," Nick corrected her, "that if this escalates, she would give the police every cooperation. She said that the neighborhood had to find its own solution."

"A final solution?" LaCroix prompted.

Nick ignored him and continued to persuade the younger vampire. "I have an idea how the students can gather the kind of evidence we need to bust the Shock Troops. Will you at least wait to hear what Althea thinks about it?"

"Who is your master, Paige," LaCroix demanded impatiently, "this mortal woman, or me?"

Paige narrowed her eyes and set her chin stubbornly. "If Althea and the class agree to your idea," she very pointedly turned away from LaCroix to Nicholas, "I'll go along with it." She reached back

a hand and the detective felt sufficiently assured to let go of her waist and shake on the deal.

"Paige," the master's voice was a threatening whisper, "if you had no eyes, you couldn't read."

"Braille," she retorted promptly.

"No fingers?"

Nicholas stepped between the two and said firmly, "Let me do this my way."

The master vampire stared narrowly at the defiant pair. "'How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child.'"10

Nick heard Paige draw breath and he promptly put his hand over her mouth. He looked at LaCroix and received a nod of wordless dismissal before dragging her backward in a graceless exit.

When they had reached the crowd of busy firefighters, Nick set Paige on her feet and released her. She leaned in close to him and whispered, "'Who would have thought the old man had so much blood in him?'"11

Nick took a deep breath and let it out slowly, counting to ten in every language he knew. His efforts ground to a halt when he saw Grace, standing by Althea, watching the dying flames.

Paige hurried forward with him and held out a hand of comfort to Althea. "I'll have the books replaced by tomorrow night. I'm only sorry I didn't catch the ones who did this."

Althea stared at the activity around the ruined building, too stricken to speak. Nicholas exchanged a look of concern with Grace, who explained, "We heard the call over the scanner in the lab. I thought it would be best if Althea heard it from me. She insisted that I bring her here."

"I didn't realize that you would still be in the building, Paige," the teacher said distantly. "I'm glad that you are safe. That's more important than any number of books."

The bibliophile blinked in confusion at this line of reasoning and repeated, "I can have the books replaced by tomorrow night."

Althea shook her head. "How can I teach with no classroom and no students?"

Grace assured her, "No one was here. No one was hurt. You can find a new classroom."

"No." Althea sighed heavily, a slow, weary exhalation that seemed to leave her smaller. "The students were frightened enough before this." She waved a shaking hand at the embers. "How can I ask them to risk their lives?"

Her three companions stood silently, unwilling to make promises that could not be kept. Paige finally said, "'I sing the body electric,

'The armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them. They will not let me off until I go with them, respond to them and discorrupt them and charge them full with the charge of the soul.'"12

Althea stared at her, hearing a challenge but not ready to answer it.

"Did your family come north on the Underground Railroad?" Paige asked her urgently.

The teacher nodded. "It was illegal to teach a slave to read. My great-grandmother learned in secret and completed her education when she came to Canada."

Face to face, Paige demanded, "Are you slave or free?"

The answer was plain. A fire of determination shone from Althea and she nodded her head once as emphasis. "We will continue!"

Her fire caught Grace as well. "I have an idea for the classrooms. Do you think it's too late to talk to your students?"

The teacher shook her head. "No one is sleeping now," Nick, Paige, Grace and Althea drove the short distance to the honored grandmother's apartment. True to her prediction, the room was full of the English class members. They greeted their teacher in a profusion of Chinese and English.

"Ladies!" With this one word, Althea achieved silence. She looked at each of them in turn. "Do you still wish to learn?"

There was low murmuring that even Paige could not follow. The grandmother said firmly, "Yes."

Althea looked to Grace, and Grace spoke her part. "The early Christian church was under persecution like this. They met in private homes to pray. Althea can come to your apartments, a different one each night, and teach the class. Will you do this?"

Grandmother whispered something in Chinese and Paige leaned forward to catch it. She translated aloud. "That is how the Christians

meet in China today. The police would punish us severely if we were to be caught."

"Not here," Althea asserted, her voice hoarse with tears. "Not in this country. Not in my neighborhood!"

Softly, Grace recited, "'Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for You are with me, Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.'"13

Nicholas had to close his eyes and look away, as from a brightness, Paige went pale and sat very straight. This was the one book she could not read.

Nick cleared his throat before speaking. "I am a policeman. In Canada, my job is to protect and to serve. Will you help me do my job?"

The class members looked at each other in silence and, since he had not been given an outright refusal, Nick continued. "We need evidence to arrest the gang members; information about their activities. Will you ladies write down what you see? Will you ask your neighbors to help?"

A younger woman, one of the factory workers, asked warily, "What would you want us to do?"

"Nothing but watch and record," the policeman explained. "You know who the gang members are. You know where they deal, where they meet. Write that down. Write down times, dates, places. Describe the people you see dealing."

"They will attack us," one of the women objected.

"Travel together," Althea suggested. "Stay in groups. You don't have to follow them; in fact, don't! Only write down what you see from your windows, going to work, or going to the store."

"We do not know so much English," grandmother objected.

"I can translate," Nick offered.

"And I will be teaching you," Althea assured them.

"Yes," grandmother nodded. She looked around at each of her countrywomen. "We will do this."

Paige stood and bowed very low. "Thank you, honored grandmother."

With a glint of humor in her eyes, grandmother bowed in her turn.

As the meeting adjourned, Grace prepared to take Althea home and Nick to return to his shift. He eyed Paige sternly. "You will let the police handle this?"

The younger woman let her eyes go wide in innocence. "I said I would let Althea and the class decide. I stand with them." At his skeptical look she insisted, "I made a promise." The policeman accepted her word with relief.

Paige added, "I made some calls about your book. It's not at the university in Prague or the floating bookstore in Venice." She shrugged. "It's bound to turn up somewhere."

"Paige," Nick asked, "just how many books do you have?"

She blinked. "Including the publishing house?"

Nick closed his eyes and sighed. "Forget I asked."

Over the next two weeks Althea became a circuit rider, holding day and evening classes in homes, apartments and storage rooms. She was accompanied at all times by a watchful Gryphon or Heron or Paige. The vampire replaced the books as promised and acted as guide and translator. She was a model of good behavior, sitting quietly in the back of the classrooms with a book.

The women acquired a good many notes recording the comings and goings of the gang members. One of the women persuaded her husband to position a video camera in their storefront display. A floating mahjongg game began at a street café and moved around whenever the group was harassed by Shock Troops. Everything the women saw was duly recorded.

Nick waited for a pattern to build up in the reports: delivery routes, drop sites, transaction dates. He then took what the class had gathered, videotape and all, to Captain Cohen. There was a brief interdepartmental squabble between Vice, Homicide and Gang Crimes, after which Nick and Schanke were teamed with Adams from Vice and Grayson from the gang unit.

"What we have here, gentlemen," Cohen briefed them, "are the makings of an excellent case. It's all here, right down to the license plates."

"I'd feel better about this," Adams said, "if we could be sure that the witnesses will testify to back up their evidence."

Nick replied carefully, "They will testify if they are assured that the entire gang will go down for a long time."

There was a general protest at this. "We'd have to catch them all with their hands in the stuff!"

Nick raised one finger. "There is one place that we'll find them all: the distribution center. Look at the routes, look at the video. I think we'll find it right here." He pointed to an old warehouse on the neighborhood map.

Grayson nodded in agreement. "Let me see that video again." A button was pushed and the replay began. A Shock Trooper walked into view. By Paige's description, this was the muscular gang member that had tried to intimidate her.

Grayson grinned widely and sat back in his chair. "And it's not even my birthday." In response to the questioning looks of the others, he explained, "That's Klaus, leader of the Shock Troops. He's the one who turned the gang on to their new businesses. We cut off that head, we slay the dragon."

Nick grinned. "I'll remember to carry my shield."

"So, how do we go in?" Schanke asked impatiently.

Adams dug out the delivery schedule. "This looks like payday. Everybody comes in for new supplies." He referred to the map. "We can park our own cameras up here and get exclusive footage of every player."

The captain chose a spot on the map away from the warehouse. "We can collect them here as they leave with the merchandise. When they've run through the roster," she referred to the schedule, "we can hit the headquarters." She folded her arms and surveyed the collected evidence. "I'd say we've <u>all</u> been given an early birthday present, gentlemen."

Nick discreetly passed the word to Althea to tell the class to keep close to home for the next few days, giving her a bare outline of the plan. She promised her discretion and also offered to keep Paige occupied. "There's a book of mine she's asked to borrow. That should engage her enthusiasm, detective." She smiled at his embarrassed relief.

All the elements for a successful bust were in place when the police began their evening vigil. However, after several hours went

by with no deliveries, it became obvious that the party was over before it had started.

"Captain, I want to go in and see what they've got in there," Nick begged Cohen.

She shrugged. "There's probably nothing to see, but we may as well be thorough." She pointed to Nick, Schanke and three of the uniformed officers they'd brought in and waved them on toward the central warehouse.

All the precautions taken in entering seemed wasted when the police team stood in an empty building.

"We've been robbed" Schanke exclaimed, disgusted. "They must have moved everything out last night!"

Cohen looked at Nick. "Could they have been warned?"

Nicholas shook his head emphatically. "The neighborhood wants them out. Only the class knew, and they didn't know the details."

He paused and cocked his head. There was an odd smell in the building, the smell of something burning. He looked around until he saw the sparking fuse, the length of it hidden along a metal beam. A quick tracking of it began with the contraption that had caused it to light when the door was opened and ended at the barrel reeking of gasoline.

"Out!" he shouted, pulling the two people nearest him. "It's a trap! Get out!"

All of the police ran from the building, diving for cover as the explosion shattered the windows and sent flames roaring up and out through the building. Slowly they got to their feet to make an account of all parts before looking back at the blaze.

"We'd better call the fire department to blow out the candles," Schanke said.

The next night, Paige flew to Althea's apartment building and landed on the roof. She was careful not to be seen as she came down the stairs to meet the teacher and escort her to class.

The vampire counted the steps to herself and slipped through the door at the proper landing. She came to a halt in front of Althea's apartment, staring in shock at the splintered door lying inside on the floor.

She walked over it gingerly into the room. Books were torn and scattered across the floor. Shelves were overturned. A lamp and a mirror lay shattered in pieces.

"Althea?" Paige began to use her heightened senses to listen for a heartbeat and to cast about for a scent. She caught the faint smell of blood. "Althea?" She whirled, hissing, at a sound behind her.

Grandmother stood in the doorway. She flinched away from the vampire but bowed politely. "The teacher is not here, kitsune." Her voice was tearful. "She was taken to the hospital after she was beaten."

"Who?" Paige demanded. "Who did this? Did you see them?"

"No. We were watching elsewhere." The old woman shook her head. "We came to look for her when she did not join out mahjongg game."

"Will she live?" Paige asked fearfully. Mortals were so fragile.

"Yes. But she will be a long time healing." Grandmother wrung her hands. "She asked for you to teach the class."

The vampire turned her face away, covering her eyes with a hand. "Do you still wish to learn?"

"We are afraid, kitsune." grandmother answered honestly.

"I promised to protect you," Paige made the beginnings of an apology.

"The police tried to catch the gang last night," grandmother told her. "The gang was ready and set a trap for them. Your brother told us, warned us. He said that he would tell you."

"He did not!" Paige hissed. She had come here as soon as darkness permitted, with no stop to call Nicholas, but her bookstore could have sent a message. She had given Nicholas his chance. Althea had been in her charge.

Solemnly, Paige took off her bookbag and handed it to the old woman. "Please watch this for me. I must keep my promise."

The elder looked at her for a moment, wanting to give advice and deciding finally not to waste it. She bowed once and left silently.

Paige knelt among the injured books and began to sniff out a trail. She scented the two who had been with Klaus the night she had cleared the sidewalk. She caught the scent of Klaus himself. Coward, he was, to need help to beat an old woman. The vampire growled in her throat.

That smell — what was it? Paige picked up books and set them aside. On the floor, battered but undamaged, was the copy of I See by my Outfit that Paige had given to Gryphon. The gang had been warned of the police raid by one who had known and betrayed a trust. Althea's guardian had attended her beating. Paige opened a window and flew out of it, howling on the trail.

She came to ground behind the burned storefront that had been a classroom. "Gryphon!" At her shout, a shadow began running, with Paige in hot pursuit. She caught up with him under the smoke-damaged mural and shoved him face-first against the wall. Morpheus looked down from the mural at this fair-haired version of his sister. "'Never run from anything immortal!'" she snarled. "'It attracts their attention!'14

"Why did you do it?" Gryphon, face against the burned wall, could not see the vampire's blazing eyes.

"I needed the money!" Gryphon's answer was muffled.

Paige slammed him against the wall, once. "You beat Althea for money?" she shrieked.

"No! No! I didn't, I swear!" Gryphon protested. "I told Klaus about the raid, but that's it! He didn't even pay me!"

Paige swung Gryphon around and caught his eyes. "Look at me!" she insisted. "Tell me what you did. Tell me why."

Gryphon obediently recited, "I went to Klaus and sold information to him. I told him the time and place of the police raid."

"Why?" came the terse prompting.

"I needed the money for university." Even under compulsion, Gryphon's voice was desperate.

"You had a scholarship!" Paige fisted his shirtfront, close to throwing him against the wall again.

The former gang member shook his head slowly. "The head of the committee has a friend in the prosecutor's office. He got my juvenile record. He told me," Gryphon hesitated, despair choking even the command to speak, "that I wasn't a 'suitable candidate', that the scholarship would be wasted on me."

"Oh, Gryphon." Paige mourned with him, her anger cooling. She had traded her soul to LaCroix for the chance to learn to read and time to read in; she could not blame him for his bargain.

"I thought I could get money from Klaus, if I had something to trade." The confession flowed out of him. "I told him about the raid. I should have known he'd set a trap." The young man looked away, showing a bruise on his face too colorful to have been Paige's handiwork.

"When I came to get paid, they jumped me instead." He shrugged his shoulders, then winced. "I used to run with them until a B&E went wrong. They left me for dead. Last night, they did it again."

"Althea?" Paige whispered.

"The last thing they said to me was that they'd teach the lesson." Gryphon sagged against the wall, emptied of words.

There was a swirl of wind and a shadow stood behind Paige. "I see you've caught one," the hated voice said smoothly in Paige's ear. "Remember your manners, Paige: I have first taste." Teeth gleamed from a satisfied smile.

"Not this one." Paige's tone was uncharacteristically deferential, even as she moved to block the master.

"Paige. You said that you'd be willing to hunt down any bookburners." The predatory look focused on the younger vampire. "You haven't changed your mind, have you?"

"No, but he's not one of them, not really," Paige continued to stand in LaCroix's way.

"He helped them, didn't he?" The master found a fascination in his child's dilemma.

"But he makes these powerful poems," Paige argued desperately. They're called 'rap'."

"Artists are never properly appreciated until they're dead. Ask Nicholas." LaCroix raised a hand toward the young man but his attention was on Paige.

She wrapped her hand around his wrist. "People are more..." She choked and failed for breath. "More important than..." Her voice cut out completely and she had to restart it, "than books."

One eyebrow arced in disbelief. "Have you been listening to Nicholas?" Paige said nothing but clung stubbornly to the master's arm. He leaned down to face her closely, as though she were the prey tonight. "Do you <u>really</u> mean that, Paige?"

She merely nodded, unable to bear repeating herself.

"Perhaps we could work out a trade." At these words Paige released her hold and braced herself. The master's bargains were always unequal..

LaCroix rubbed his wrist, weighing out a suitable price for her presumption. "The Secret of the Old Clock by Carolyn Keene. The original edition."

Paige's eyes went wide. "You won't like that. It's..."

"Bring it to the radio station tonight," he continued, "with a book of matches."

His child stood silent and still before him. She turned slowly, painfully, to look again at the mortal whose life she would be buying. She started to shake. LaCroix's eyes went half-lidded with pleasure at the intensity of her grief.

"'Look not so fierce on me'," Paige said finally. "'Adders and serpents, let me breathe a while.'" She took a breath and laced her fingers together to hold her hands steady as she repeated Marlowe's version of the last words of Faust. "'Ugly hell, gape not! Come not, Lucifer!'" LaCroix inclined his head modestly at this and looked at her expectantly. "'I'll burn my books. Ah, Mephistopheles!'"15

The master patted his child on the head. "That's a good girl, Paige. Don't be late." He paused before leaving with a nod toward Gryphon. "Paige. Make sure that he forgets this."

Paige watched her master leave, standing between him and the mortal until she could not tell his shadow from the others.

"Gryphon," she met him eye to eye, "what did you see?"

"That guy wanted to kill me," he gasped out, fear overriding the hypnotic effect.

"No," Paige told him sadly. "I wanted to kill you. I wanted to hurt you, because of Althea."

"I didn't..." Gryphon repeated himself.

"I know," Paige assured him. "I'm sorry."

"That guy..." Gryphon persisted.

Paige made her hold on his mind stronger. "That guy walked away. He didn't want to get involved. You understand?" Gryphon nodded slowly. "There was just you and me here, taking care of business." Another slow nod.

The vampire released her hold and stepped back. "Gryphon, you owe me. You owe Althea."

He looked at her, then down and away. "I guess I do." He shrugged his shoulders helplessly. "What do you want me to do? I can't take on the Shock Troops single-handed."

Paige set her jaw. She knew that she could take on the gang single-handedly but was held in check by her promises. "We're going to go to the cops. We're going to talk to Nicholas and see what he can do."

Nick and his partner were understandably wary of Gryphon as an informant. Police experience had dampened any surprise they might have had at Gryphon's confession. It also did not make them any more likely to trust his offer of help.

Nick spoke privately with the younger vampire. "Did you make him come in? Did you influence his testimony in any way?"

"No," she said firmly. "He's here because he wants to make it right."

Nick sighed heavily. There was already one failed raid and an assault on the record, along with the trust lost from the neighborhood. They were a long way from making it right. Unless — inspiration struck him, as bright as the sunlight he craved.

"Gryphon?" The young man looked up as Nick and Paige reentered the interrogation room. "Would Klaus believe you if you came to him with another deal?"

"I don't know." His shoulders hung in a defeated slope. "We never seem to part friends, you know?" The bruises on his face and arms spoke for him.

"But he does think he has something you need," Schanke pointed out. "If he thought you were going to sell more information, to try to make good on your losses..."

"What he owes me, he can't afford to pay." He clenched a fist. "For what he did to Althea, he should take a dive off the CN Tower."

"That's it!" Paige exclaimed. "If you were to storm in and try to attack him, you could still lead us to him!"

"Finding the gang is not the problem. Having something solid for an arrest is," the mortal policeman reminded her.

"You just need to convince him that we're planning another raid," Nick explained. "If he believes that, we can follow him to the new supply house and get him before he can pull out."

"Okay, so I storm in and try to take his head off, and tell him that the cops are going to do it for me," Gryphon outlined the plan. "The Shock Troops beat the snot out of me and then they evacuate the new hiding place. You follow them and bust them. Works for me."

"Problem," Schanke pointed out, "we can't endanger a civilian."

"I'm not a civilian, I'm an informant," Gryphon countered.

"Not good enough." Schanke shook his head.

"I'll go in with you," Paige said impulsively.

"No!" the three men chorused together.

"You're a civilian, too." Nick fixed her with a warning look.

"I've already held off three of them," Paige insisted, pointing to Nick, "and they already know you're a cop." She lowered her voice to a reasoning tone. "All I have to do is get Gryphon out. They'll be in a hurry to move their supply."

"We wire you," Nick suggested.

Gryphon shook his head. "They'd find it right away."

"Can you just make a big noise at the door?" Schanke asked. "Without going in?"

Paige agreed enthusiastically. "I can pull you back before they pull you in! They can't chase us if they want to get their stuff hidden."

"That sounds better." Schanke looked doubtfully at Nick, who scowled in disapproval.

Gryphon measured Paige. "Did you really break their arms?"

"What?" Nick demanded explosively.

Paige looked from one face to the other, trying to frame her answer to the best advantage. "Well," she shrugged, "just one." She avoided looking at Nicholas as she said, "I know a little martial arts. It gives me more power in my swing."

"I'll trust her for backup," Gryphon nodded.

"Nick?" Schanke looked at his partner for confirmation.

His partner sighed heavily. "Let's see if we can sell it to the captain."

On the way out, Nick halted at the door. Paige was singing under her breath:

"'By knight of ghosts and shadows
I summoned am to tourney!
Ten leagues beyond the wide world's end
Methinks it is no journey!'"16

He took hold of the scruff of her neck and whispered fiercely to her, "And of your five sound senses may you never be forsaken!"

She merely smiled at him, unrepentant, and began to whistle the chorus celebrating "bonnie" madness.

The captain was a hard sell but she eventually acknowledged that the plan had merit.

"Providing," she held out a condition, "that our informant here is pulled out safely." She raised her hand against Paige's protest, looking at Nick as she said, "If she can't get him away before he's pulled in, you go in after him. I want zero casualties on this."

A chorus of "Yes, captain" came from all present, including Paige and Gryphon. Cohen glanced at the clock. "I think we can pull ourselves together by tomorrow night. Gryphon, you will be held in custody in a safe house until then. No one will know you've been here."

She looked over to Paige. "Would you like some protection, miss?" Nick held in a strangled sound.

"Paige," the younger vampire prompted dutifully. "I'll be safe at my apartment. It's beneath a bookstore that's usually quite busy."

"All right, then." Cohen was satisfied. "We'll have things in motion by the start of night shift tomorrow." She dismissed them with a curt nod. Schanke took Gryphon in charge and Nick walked out beside Paige.

The younger vampire halted when she saw the time. All her bravado suddenly evaporated. "He's almost done. I have to go," she murmured.

"Paige, are you all right?" The abrupt change in the other's mood concerned Nick.

"LaCroix," Paige stumbled over the name, "asked for one of my books. I promised to bring it to him."

Nick raised a skeptical eyebrow. "You're giving LaCroix one of your books? Not The Screwtape Letters!"

"No," Paige assured him. "We made a trade." She shrugged but could not quite smile. "I'll keep looking for the book you wanted. I know a dealer in Morocco who owes me a few favors." She turned away from his concern and left the police station.

Much later that evening, scandalously close to closing time, a much subdued figure stood at the end of the bar in The Raven. She held a vase full of ashes, clutched to her like a broken toy.

Miklos took one look and liberated a bottle of the sweet stuff. He got someone to cover for him and he put an arm around the blonde at the end of the bar and led her out into the night.

They flew together to a quiet spot under the stars and Miklos opened the bottle and poured two glasses. He filled the other's glass twice more without comment, content to let her break the silence.

Finally, she let out a slow sigh. "The Secret of the Old Clock was the first Nancy Drew novel, printed in 1930. It has not been out of print since then." Her voice was steady, as though she had gone past tears. "There never was a 'Carolyn Keene'. The books were written by teams of writers hired by the Stratmeyer Syndicate." The glass went up in a salute and was drained. She stared at it before holding it out for a refill.

"One of those writers was...is," the brief hesitation was all there was to show that the speaker was on her fourth glass, "a columnist for the Toledo Blade," another salute. "She has said that she wants to write until she dies." Another hesitation before the glass was emptied. "Nothing I can say will change her mind."

Miklos filled the glass with the last of the bottle. Gently he said, "'Quaff, O quaff this kind nepenthe, and forget this loss of yours.'"17

She smiled sadly at him and tilted back her head to knock back the last of The Raven's finest. Shakily, she rose to her feet, holding the vase with both hands. She poured the ashes into the night winds, saying,

"'There is no Frigate like a Book
To take us Lands away
Nor any Coursers like a Page
Of prancing Poetry —
This Traverse may the poorest take
Without oppress of Toll —

How frugal is the Chariot
That bears the Human Soul!'"18

Miklos saw her home and tucked her in just before sunrise. Janette let him in to the cellar without comment.

"Come out here, Klaus! I want to have a chat with you!" Gryphon pounded heavily on the barred entrance to the Shock Troops' headquarters.

"He does know that he's not to go in, doesn't he?" Nick questioned Schanke uneasily. They were hidden on the roof across the alley, set up with recording equipment aimed at the doorway. The team that would follow the Shock Troops was hidden further down the street.

His mortal partner nodded. "The lawyers gave him the whole deal this afternoon. Did you talk to Paige?"

"Yes." Nick was no less uneasy. Paige had been restless and snappish, as though the hunger were building in her, but he could have sworn she was coming off one of her binges. "She pulls him away and they both leave."

"Klaus!" Gryphon shouted hoarsely. "Do you only beat up old women or are you coming out to face me?"

The door opened and the underling who had helped Klaus block the sidewalk looked out. She waved her cast dismissively. "Get out. We're not buying tonight."

Gryphon grabbed at her arm and pulled her forward. "You get him out here or I'll put you in a matching set of casts." He raised his voice to shout past her, "The teacher wasn't included in the bargain, Klaus. Very sloppy. I should let the cops have you."

The gang leader stepped into the doorway, taking the injured member's place. "You're a little late for that, aren't you? They came, they saw, they got nothing." He laughed nastily. "Haven't I thanked you for that?"

"But I wasn't enough," Gryphon accused. "You had to go after the teacher." He shook his head. "I'm not waiting for the cops. I finish this now!" He took a swing that Klaus caught easily.

"What cops?" the gang leader asked. "Are you wired?" He made a grab at Gryphon's midsection, which was evaded.

Gryphon freed his hand. "Do you really think that you could move that much stuff without being seen? Toronto's finest have your whole warehouse on the menu for breakfast." He cocked his arm back as though to swing another punch. "I'll settle for your head on a platter."

"Gryphon!" Paige came charging down the alley toward the informant. "You promised to guard Althea's room at the hospital!"

He shrugged her off. "I thought I'd go to the source."

"You're coming back with me," she said firmly, grabbing an arm and pulling on it.

"I don't think so." Klaus's flunky, cast and all, challenged Paige. The vampire took hold of the cast and pushed forward with one hand and back with the other to break the cast, and the arm in it, again.

In his hiding place, Nick tensed and prepared to swarm down the fire escape to interfere. Schanke whispered beside him, "That girl's been eating her Wheaties. Myra can't do that after ten classes in self-defense!"

Klaus signaled another gang member to bring the injured one inside. He faced Paige and Gryphon alone. Paige ignored him to focus on Gryphon. "Next time," she told him, "Althea would want the police to handle it."

"Next time," Klaus taunted, "you won't have your watchdog." As he looked at the vampire, his scornful look changed to surprise followed by fear and then covered by bravado. Thankfully, whatever look she was giving him was not going to be on the evidence tape.

The gang leader turned suddenly to go into his headquarters, giving brusque orders as he went. Paige and Gryphon ran back to the Caddy, while Nick and Schanke quickly changed tapes.

A pair of uniformed officers would continue to watch the gang headquarters while a chase car followed them to their warehouse. That location would be radioed to the squad waiting to move in and make the arrests.

"Jackpot!" Schanke whispered triumphantly. The Shock Troops had started swarming like bees from a dropped hive. "Let's get down to the car!"

Gryphon had been taken into custody when his part was finished. However, Paige, as a civilian, had been permitted to wait in the Caddy after a solemn promise not to "get in the way".

Nick objected immediately. "Paige, get out of my car."

"I want to see this through!" she objected.

"This is a police matter," he argued. Schanke rolled his eyes and refused to get involved.

"My books, my business," she said firmly. "I want to see how this comes out."

"I'll tell you all about it," Nick offered. "Later."

Paige set her jaw. "Like you told me about the last raid? I either ride or I walk." She gestured to indicate that she would fly.

His teeth clenched, Nick grated out, "No poetry."

Paige favored him with a triumphant smile. "No chandeliers."

Schanke decided that this agreement made it safe to get into the car. "Let's get this show on the road," the mortal urged his partner, adding enthusiastically, "'He tasks me and I shall have him!'"19

Nick stared at this betrayal from such an unexpected quarter. Paige's smile was sweet enough to gag a bee.

"Haven't you seen the movie?" Schanke shook his head. "Great movie. Gregory Peck against the Great White Whale."

"I," Paige said primly, "preferred the book."

Nick made a low growling sound that wasn't quite in tune with the car's engine.

"We have a location." The announcement over the radio diverted the trio's attention. "Proceed with all due care to Wernert and Whitmer."

Nick pulled the Caddy in to join a dozen cars that had already surrounded the Shock Troop's new warehouse.

"We've counted twenty going in." Captain Cohen updated them tersely. "We may have more if there was someone inside to begin with, but I won't settle for less." She caught sight of Paige in the back seat but said only, "I trust your witness can stay put and stay down."

"Yes, ma'am," Paige assured her solemnly and crouched down below the level of the windows. It was just as well that the look Nick aimed at her was also not going to be on any evidence tape.

The captain did the honors, announcing the ID and the demand to surrender. For the second time that night, the hive broke open and the Shock Troops flew out in all directions. Gunfire was limited; few of the gang members wanted to draw on a force that outnumbered them.

Nick ran into the hideout just as the gang leader was running out the back. Nick followed him while keeping his own speed to just under mortal limits. There were too many witnesses around to take chances.

Klaus was running full out and had begun to draw well ahead. Before Nick could put on an extra, unnatural burst of speed, he was passed by a tall, slender, fair-haired runner.

Paige leaped at Klaus and bore him to the ground. She turned him on his back easily with her uncanny strength and locked eyes to demand, "Silence!" He would make no sound now but would be aware of what happened.

The vampire pulled up Klaus's shirt to expose his belly.

"Paige, don't." Nicholas had to fight the wave of hunger and rage that radiated from his blood-sister. There was enough life for both of them to feed. It tempted. He fought it and won.

"He owes me blood, Nicholas." She laid her hand flat on the mortal's stomach. "For the books, for Althea."

Nicholas looked back toward the sounds of the searchers. "They will be here soon."

"I know how to hide my kills," she retorted. She lowered her head to taste the skin with slow, even strokes of her tongue. Once the teeth drew blood, she could not be stopped.

Nicholas knew only one thing had the power to pull Paige from a kill. "'The quality of mercy is not strained'," he began,

> "'It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
> upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;
> It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes
> 'Tis mightiest in the mightiest: it becomes
> The throned monarch better than his crown.'"

He searched his memory for the rest of it. Paige had not moved but she was listening. He went down on one knee as he had been taught to do when making petition of a lady.

"'Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
That, in the course of justice, none of us
Should see salvation; we do pray for mercy;
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy.'"20

His blood-sister stayed, head down, in a pose of silence. Finally, she hissed in frustration. She said to Nicholas, "Let me give him this, at least."

She locked eyes once again with Klaus. "You will forget this. In all your waking hours, you will know only that I chased you and the cop caught you. But when you sleep," her voice lowered to a purr and she smiled with her fangs and glowing eyes, "'Perchance to dream! Aye, there's the rub.'" The hand on the belly curled into a claw that drew a slow line across but left no mark. "'For in that sleep of death what dreams may come?'" 21 She snapped her jaws shut in the air just before his face and pulled away.

Nick moved forward and fastened handcuffs on Klaus. "You're under arrest." The words released him from Paige's hold and he began to struggle against the restraint. Nick hauled him to his feet and pushed him toward the waiting police cars.

Captain Cohen saw Nick coming out of the alley with his prisoner and raised an eyebrow. "Twenty," she said with satisfaction.

Paperwork inevitably followed, with Paige giving her deposition and each member of the reading class promising to testify in court.

A week after Althea's release from the hospital, a party was held for her that spilled out of the newly refurbished classroom and onto the neighboring block. Detective Knight and Paige were in attendance, drinking out of bottles clearly labeled "cranberry juice".

"We have a gift for you, kitsune." The grandmother held out a carefully wrapped package.

Paige opened it to find a Chinese book of fairy tales. She blushed and bowed low. "It is wonderful, grandmother."

"And for you, detective." The old woman passed another package to Nicholas. It contained a set of calligraphy brushes, a block of ink, and a small supply of hand-made paper. She explained to them both, "You have taught us to read and to write and shown to us the beauty and power in words."

Nick bowed low in his turn. "It is my honor to protect and to serve you." Grandmother did not answer but hid a knowing smile behind her teacup.

Paige approached Althea. The bibliophile raised her voice to address the partygoers. "Frederick Douglass was a slave who went on to become a statesman. He said, 'Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and when any one class is made to feel that society is in an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe.'22

"The name of the committee member who denied Gryphon's scholarship has been leaked to the press." Her speech was interrupted by scattered cheers.

"I have been in contact with a publishing house which supplies my bookstore. They have agreed to fund university scholarships for any graduate of Althea's class who applies!" Rousing cheers went down the block as the teacher tearfully thanked Paige.

"You come to me for any book you need," she promised. "I'll order what I don't have on hand."

"I've been outdone!" Grace officially declared.

"Does this mean that you don't need me any more?" Nick teased her.

"As a matter of fact," she began slowly as Nick hung his head, willingly putting it into the noose, "we <u>will</u> need to bring the books back from the apartment to the schoolroom."

"You know where to find me." Grace laughed at his tone of mock resignation.

As the party began to wind down, Nick observed the formality of driving Paige home. Too much "cranberry juice" had made her dangerously loquacious and he considered it wisdom to see that she was properly tucked in.

"Will you be holing up in one of your libraries again?" he asked hopefully.

Paige shook her head. "Not for a while. I did promise to teach until Althea was well enough to take over." She tried to count off on her fingers. "I also promised to testify. Still, I may be away for a little while. There's a new season at Stratford.!"

"Weren't you banned from Stratford?" Nick asked.

Paige frowned. "That was the Old Globe and the parties involved are..."

"Buried in Westminster?" Nick prompted.

"Believe what you like," she sniffed. "Erica took my side at the time."

"Yes, she did," Nick acknowledged, "and wasn't she banned as well?"

Paige coughed. "Stratford, Ontario, is much better anyway."

"Of course." The policeman kept his eyes on the traffic lights.

Paige continued aloud to herself, "I can even see a matinee if I stay in the theater overnight and...East Berlin!"

"What?" The wild swerve of topics had Nick holding more tightly to his control of the car.

"That book you asked for: the Aberat!" Paige shouted. "It's in my library in Berlin! Now that the wall is down, we can just..."

"Paige," Nick kept his voice to a reasonable level. "Would that be a library in a church?"

"Well, yes, but it's mostly a ruin." She waved away that barrier. "We can get in through the basement and..."

"Paige." Nick parked the car and met her eyes. "I was in that library." He paused, watching her carefully. "LaCroix..."

Her eyes narrowed. "What?"

"There was a fire..." his voice trailed off.

"MY LIBRARY!? Not again!" Nick flinched as she punched the dashboard. When she raised her fist to wave it around, he saw with relief that his car wasn't damaged.

"I swear that I will find my other copy and have Merlin scan it into the Gutenberg Project on the Internet!" Nick made an unsuccessful grab after her as she scrambled out of the car.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do!" he pleaded.

Paige glowered at the older vampire. "What wouldn't you do to him?"

Nick opened his mouth, shut it again, then amended himself. "Don't do anything you can't survive."

Paige scoffed at that and stalked off, going only a few steps before she was airborne. Nick counted to ten slowly, shut the car door and

committed her to the care of whoever looked after those who rush in where even fools fear to tread.

The Nightcrawler's listeners later that night became the audience to a curious exchange. When the station came out of commercial, a female voice was saying, "Hello, daddy."

"Paige," the Nightcrawler responded calmly. "You've been drinking. Was it anyone we know?"

"Oh, no," she assured him unsteadily, "it's just paint thickener."

"'Oh, churl, drunk all and left no friendly drop to help me after?'" he responded drily.23

An inebriated giggle answered him. "You've been very naughty, daddy."

"You have no idea."

"My library in Berlin burned to the ground," she accused. "That was very unkind."

"Well, you would keep such unsuitable books in it," he admonished her.

"The Mein Kampf was a gift from you, daddy," she retorted. "But never fear. 'I am a part of all that I have read.'"24

"Is that so, Paige." The soft voice became chilling. "What have you read?"

"Everything in sight." There was another giggle. "But hush! It's a school night! What little ears are listening?"

"What a pity I haven't got a chandelier," he observed archly.

"No need! No need! Attend." With that command, Paige began to declaim:

> "'O in what sweets dost thou thy sins enclose!
> That tongue that tells the story of thy days,
> Making lascivious comment on thy sport...'"

"Paige," the Nightcrawler interrupted her sharply.

She persisted:

> "'Cannot dispraise but in a kind of praise;
> Naming thy name blesses an ill report.'"

"I'm warning you." There was cool menace in the words. The warning was ignored.

> "'O what a mansion have these vices got
> Which for their habitation chose out thee,

Where beauty's veil doth cover every blot
And all things turn to fair that eyes can see!'"

"That's enough." The tone was brittle.

Paige's voice dropped to a stage whisper:

"'Take heed, dear heart, of this large privilege;
The hardest knife, ill-used doth lose his edge!'"25

"Out!" Radio listeners all over Toronto flinched reflexively. "Get out of my studio!" The rest of the conversation was lost to the radio audience, who suddenly found themselves listening to a commercial for oatmeal.

Endnotes

1 Wm. Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, I.ii.394
2 Taking liberty with Shakespeare, *Hamlet,* III.i.56
3 David Gerrold quoting someone else, but I can't remember who.
4 Edgar Allen Poe, *The Raven*
5 Alfred Lord Tennyson, *The Lady of Shallot,* pt. iii
6 Groucho Marx
7 W. S. Gilbert, *The Pirates of Penzance (1879),* II
8 Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*
9 John M. Ford, *Final Reflection*
10 Shakespeare, *King Lear,* I.iv.312
11 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, V.i.42
12 Walt Whitman, *I Sing the Body Electric*
13 Psalm 23:4 (New International Version)
14 Peter S. Beagle, *The Last Unicorn*
15 Christopher Marlowe, *Faustus*
16 Anonymous, *Tom O'Bedlam*, st.8
17 Poe, *The Raven*
18 Emily Dickinson, *No. 1263*
19 Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*
20 Shakespeare, *Merchant of Venice,* IV.i.[182]
21 Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, III.i.65
22 Frederick Douglass, speech on the twenty-fourth anniversary of Emancipation in the District of Columbia, Washington, DC (April 1886)
23 Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*
24 John Kieran
25 Shakespeare, *Sonnet 95*

Daddy's Little You-Know-What

by Winifred McBeth

Little girl of mine
With eyes shining red
Don't take this wrong —
We thought you were dead?
Pretty as a shining star
(How I wonder what you are...)

Such a darling child
She'll never grow old
A sweet little...thing
With a smile so cold
You're malice, you're vice
You're everything (twice!)
'Cause you're Daddy's little girl!

Pompeii city now is doomed
I must flee or be...consumed.
You give immortality—
Who loves you best? Your mom or me?
I'd pay any toll
All you want is my soul
And you're daddy's little girl!

Enthralled de LaCroix

by Lorraine Duffield

You come to me like a shadow.
I gasp as I feel your hand on my neck.
I moan as your hot breath caresses my cheek.
I gasp in pain, then pleasure, when you score my neck with your brand.
I fade away as my heart pumps my life into your veins.
I wake suddenly, to Hunger.
You soothe me, bending my head down to feed, like a baby.
My eyes gaze into cool blue ocean depths.
You are my master, LaCroix,
And I am ... Yours.
So happy.
So enthralled.

Be Careful What You Wish For

by L. L. Wright

"You know, you have to be careful, very careful, what you wish for — you, you...! It's you! LaCroix! I know it's you! It has to be...who else could it be!

"Been a long time, hasn't it? Was I that hard to find? No! No! That's not it...that's not the reason...is it?

"You waited...I know you, LaCroix! You waited and watched, watched to see if I failed or succeeded.

"I did, you know! I did...I won! I won my freedom...I won! Damn you, LaCroix!"

The speaker, a slender man dressed in loose-fitting garments, paced back and forth, the sound of his bare feet against the cushioned floor slapping time with the rhythm of his agitated words.

"Damn you! Damn you all! What right do you...do you have to make fun of me! I wasn't like you. I was never like you...no matter what you said or did.

"I fought you...fought you down...down...down."

Stopping his aimless pacing, the man stood looking at the light coming from the outer hallway as it poured through the heavily barred window in the door to his room.

"I'm very tired. I get tired easily these days. Just go away, LaCroix, there's nothing here...there's nothing left. It's all gone...all over...at an end."

Moving away from the small observation window and its narrow shaft of light, the man went to the corner opposite and there, in the dim light, settled himself against the thick padding of the angled walls.

Sitting, head bowed, hands lying limply in his lap, he continued, "Poor me. Poor, foolish me. All I wanted was to be...was to be warm again. To be human again. Was that really too much to ask for?"

Throwing back his head, mirthless laughter filled the small room. "You were right...you were very right, LaCroix! Your

poor, stupid Nicholas was totally clueless. Fairy tales don't always have happy endings, do they?

"We were never meant to return, were we? All that effort...all that pain... all that heartache. And for what? To end up here, like this...a madman in an insane asylum! That's funny...very...very funny!"

Slamming his body harder and harder against the padding of the walls, his hysterical laughter turned into anguished crying.

"All I wanted was to be human again! To be warm, human, a mortal man with all the hopes, needs, desires...to live, to love, to have a family! Not to be alone any more!"

Sorrow turned quickly into anger, and he screamed into the shadows in front of him.

"I didn't ask to become what you made me! I didn't ask you to bring me over! I should have dies that night in 1228! Better you had left me dead! Better for everyone...better for everyone! Better for all!"

Sitting, rocking, hand with long slender fingers pressed tightly against the sides of his head, he continued to scream at his shadowy visitor.

"Dead would have been better...oh, God! Forgive me! She would still be alive. Still living and breathing"

His rocking stopped, and he pointed into the shadows at an image only he could see.

"You damned me! You damned me for all eternity! Why? To be another of your children, LaCroix! Forever...to crawl through darkness...forced to live off the life and blood of others. To be hated, despised, driven from place to place. Never to be at peace...never at peace! I didn't ask for that...I never wanted that!"

He looked at his hands, his impassioned tirade at an end for the time being. In a calmer voice he continued, "There's blood on my hands, always blood on my hands. I can never wash it away. For a while...for a very short while...I thought I was forgiven. But, no! The curse of blood was still with me.

"What was I to do? I had to survive!

"Oh, you taught me well! For the first few hundreds of years, I enjoyed the killing, the feeding. I don't deny it...I don't deny any of it. But I stopped the killing. For the past hundred years, I took no human lives. I lived off the blood of slaughtered animals and tried to change my life.

"I tried to repent, tried to pay back for the lives I took by becoming a hunter of killers. I became a cop, a homicide detective, and by bringing them to justice I was paying my debt to society. If needed, I had an eternity to repay."

Leaning back, his back and head cradled by the cushioning embrace of the cornered walls, he chuckled softly to himself. "Poor Schanke, dear Schanke, all those years partnered together, and he never knew, never questioned, that the man he rode with all that time was a thing out of the dark mists of legend and Hell.

He sobered. "But then there was Natalie.

"Janette taught me to live and love as a being of death and eternal night, but Natalie taught me how to be human, to touch and be touched. Oh, to be warm again...to be a human man. Something you could never understand, LaCroix," he sneered.

"I fell in love. I wanted her, needed her, but there was a problem. She was mortal, and I was...an immortal. To make love to her, I would end up killing her. The solution: either make her an immortal, the very thing I despised, or become mortal myself.

"Janette and the others thought I was crazy, but they didn't interfere. I put myself through hell...years of forcing, weaning myself off the blood, but I did it! I did it! I was free!

"I could walk in the sunlight, without fear or dread. I could eat, share a meal like other human beings...and I could love. Love as a mortal, vital man.

"I would like to think that I made her happy. I know I wasn't an easy person to deal with. I had to relearn, sometimes, the simplest things. But Nat's patience, kindness and love made all the difference."

A pleasant, contented smile crossed the lean, smooth face. "She made me happy...very happy. But, there were times," the smile faded, "in the quiet of the night I would lie by her side, just watching her, watching her breathe. Afraid, so very afraid, that any moment my happiness would be destroyed, that she would be taken from me. Or, I would think that all of this was a dream, and I would awaken from my slumber, my existence unchanged, and again be the cold, blood-craving beast that I once was.

"That cold, bitter fear would grip my very soul, twisting the light, the joy, everything around me that I had worked so hard for, into a gray, hollow emptiness. I would tell myself over and over again that everything was working out. I had won my freedom, my right to be human, to be a man. There was no reason for me to keep torturing myself, drowning my own happiness.

"Then, one day, one bright and beautiful day, Nat came to me and told me that she was pregnant. Pregnant with our child!

"Oh, how the world changed for me! I was now no longer a creature of death and destruction, I had helped bring a life into existence. This was my absolution! The child, its life, was proof that I was forgiven!

"Poor Nat, I drove her crazy, but she and the child were my whole world. I wanted everything to be right, I wanted to be a part of everything.

"When I placed my hands on her belly," his hands moved slowly in the air, re-enacting a gentle and tender memory, "I could feel our child move...move."

A stream of tears ran down his cheeks, his hands still floating in the air in front of his face. "All the fears, the horrors, the anxieties melted away. I was blessed, truly blessed."

His hands slowly dropped down and gathered themselves in his lap like pale, wilted flowers.

"She only wanted to go see her parents...a two hour drive...spend the weekend. I couldn't go with her; I was on

duty. I encouraged her...she needed time to herself...I was always under foot.

"She was only going to be gone for the weekend." The sob in his voice choked the words as they came out. "She only...went...for a...short...visit.

"Oh, God! I remember that night, I can never forget that night!

"Schanke and I were out working a case. Very simple, straightforward. We had the victim, the gun, the shooter and the motive — a drug deal gone sour. An hour's worth of paperwork, at the most.

"I saw Captain Stonetree talking to Schanke. I wondered what was so important for him to come all the way out. This wasn't a major case. Then both of them came walking toward me.

"I could see the looks on their faces, the looks in their eyes. The fear, that gut-twisting fear, hit me again. It had started raining and the cold rain was running down my neck. I was shaking, but not from the cold and the wet.

"The captain tried to break the news to me as gently as he could. He told me that Natalie, journeying back from her parents, had been hit by a drunk driver. It was very serious and I needed to go to the hospital. I became numb.

"At the hospital, a polite young doctor told me the baby, they couldn't save it — it was gone. They were doing everything they could to save her, to save my Natalie, but they couldn't stop the bleeding...couldn't stop the bleeding.

"I knelt at her bedside, praying to God, don't let them take her away. The sin's not hers, it's mine! Let me...let me bear the burden of it! I took their blood, let them have mine! Let me take the final wound, let me lie in the street, my life's blood pouring down the gutter.

"I prayed for death, I prayed to die in her place, but my prayer wasn't answered. She died that night, her smile and laughter silenced forever.

"I held her hand until they had to pry me from her. I...I don't remember much after that. The funeral, family, friends, the streets, it's all a dim blur.

"I died that night, in that hospital room. I had lived too long and loved too deeply. There was nothing left.

"It was my fault! My fault, all my fault!" His fisted hand pounded the cushioned wall again and again. "If I had stayed the way I was, she would be alive. If I had left her alone, she would be alive. She would be alive now, today. I brought this curse down on her. Oh, Nat, I never meant to hurt you!"

He turned away from beating the padded wall and stared again into the shadows on the other side of the room. Uncontrolled fury vibrating in his voice, he screamed, "Don't laugh at me! Don't you dare laugh at me, LaCroix! What right do you have to laugh at me? You have no right to laugh at me!"

Then his mood changed. He still shook; his hands trembled, fingers intertwined and pressed hard against his chest. "The fairy tale has ended. And, like all fairy tales, LaCroix, there's no happy ending. I'm now like sea foam...all appearance, but no substance. I'm nothing...just emptiness... nothing."

After a long, deep sigh, he whispered, "You have to be careful what you wish for. Very careful what you wish for."

Tired, drained of emotion, he sat, rocking gently back and forth, staring into the shadows, silent, lost in darkness.

Minutes passed, and only the sound of his ragged breath filled the room. Then, slowly, a shadow within a shadow moved toward him. In the dim, gray light, two pale slender arms, a woman's arms, reached out of the shadows and encircled him.

"Nicholas, my dear, sweet Nicholas, it's me, Janette. Do you recognize me?" The woman, an eternal beauty, looked into his face for signs of comprehension; there were none.

"My poor Nicholas," she began again, "you tell the same sad story over and over, calling any and all who listen LaCroix. LaCroix has never been here, will never come here."

She sighed and gently brushed the gray, curling hair from his face. "I'd hoped you would come out of it one day. Your bout with mortality over, you would come back to me. It's been twenty-seven years, Nicholas. You've been in this asylum twenty-seven years and you remember only that time. Why couldn't you leave that all behind? Why couldn't you forget her?"

Janette smiled and caressed his stubbled cheek. "I know. No more than I could forget you." The smile faded. "Shall we end this, end this for both of us, my old friend? Only in the name of love. I will do this only in the name of love."

Twin ruby red tears formed at the corners of her eyes. With her hand, she softly closed his eyes, and whispered into his ear to sleep and to dream. A sweet smile appeared on his lips, and remained even when Janette's fangs bit deeply into the vein in his throat and drained away his life.

She waited until she felt his heart flutter to a stop and released her hold.

With the care and tenderness of a mother putting her child to sleep, Janette arranged his body so that it would, for all appearances, be as though he was sleeping. A blood tear fell from her eyes and landed on his white, lifeless hand.

"You do have to be careful what you wish for. I wanted you back with me again, but not like this. Be at peace, my beloved, be at peace."

Janette never looked back as the door to the padded cell closed behind her. She moved silently, rapidly through the dull, dreary hallways of the institution and, finally, out into the freedom of the night.

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